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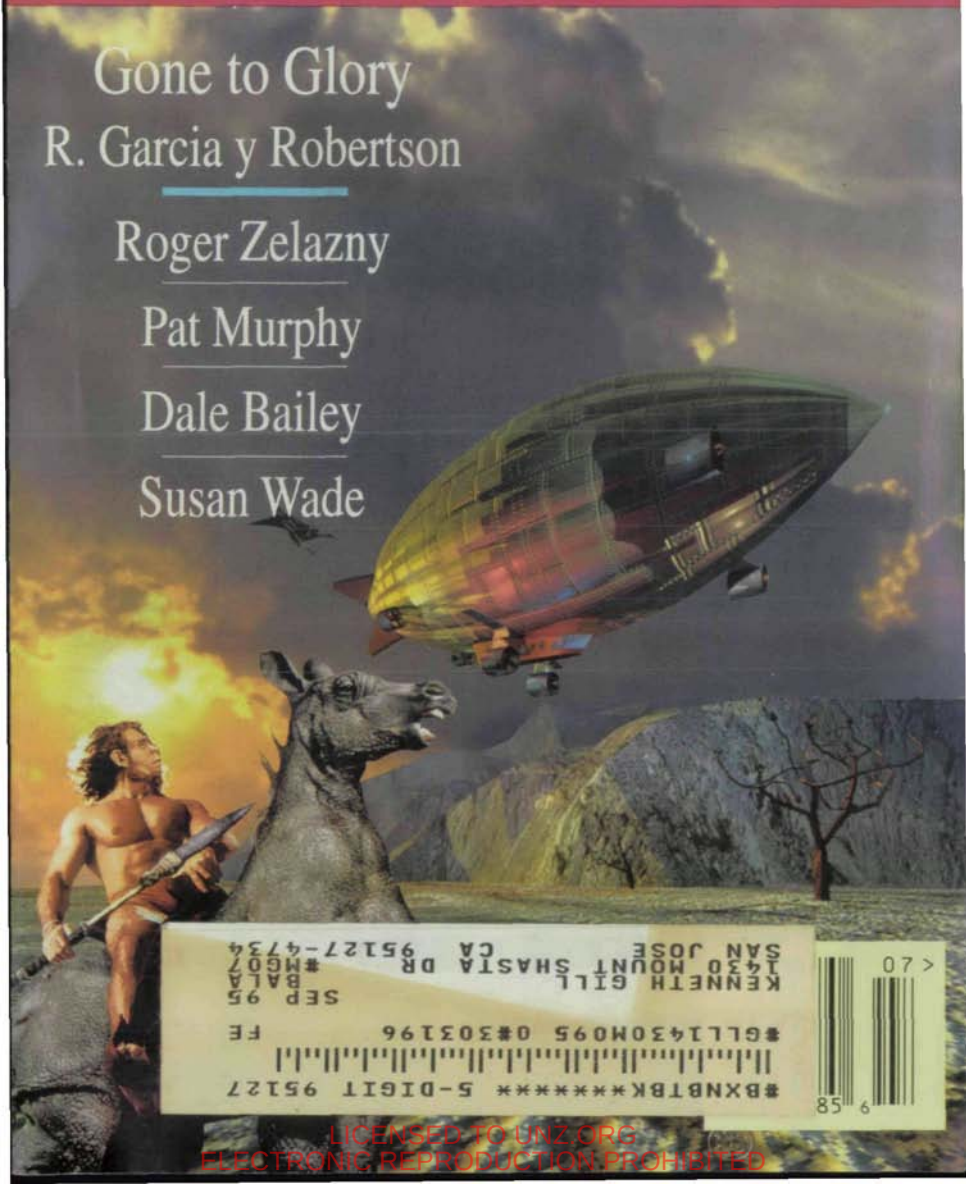

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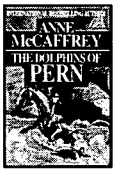

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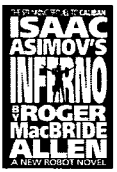

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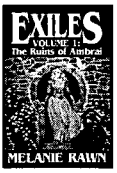

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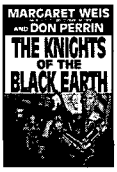

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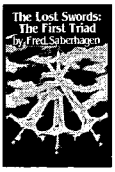

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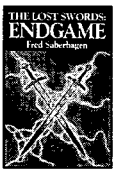

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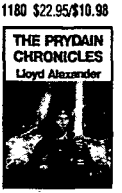

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JULY • 46th Year of Publication

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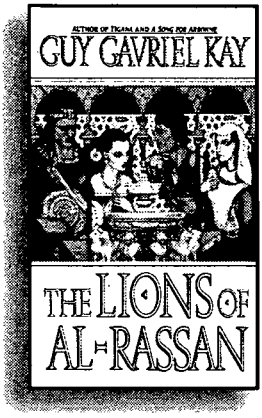

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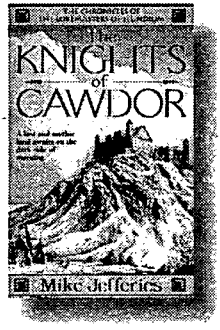

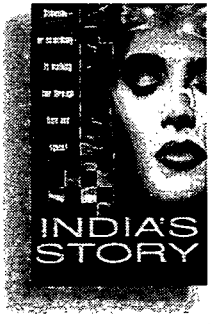

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IN LAST MONTH'S editorial, I shared reader responses to a query I made in the February issue. For those of you who haven't been following this discussion, let me explain what we're talking about.

In February, I detailed the results of the reader survey in the magazine and noted that the readership of the magazine is aging (along with the rest of science fiction's readership). Only 7 percent of our readership is under 25; most readers are over 35. This trend disturbs me. I asked readers to share their ideas about why this trend is happening, and I received a lot of letters. Last month, I shared ideas from people who identified themselves as over 26. This month, I will share the opinions and comments of the readers who identified themselves as part of the 25 and younger group.

Susan O'Fearna in Nacogdoches, Texas, warns us that the statistics might be off. "I think your readership grows older, but not as...the survey suggests. I'm sure most younger readers don't respond to surveys."

Mike Allen of Roanoke, Virginia, writes, "I think a good deal of the problem is too many young people of my generation and younger accept TV and movie sf as the sum of the genre. They can't get enough of it (witness all the sf TV currently thriving) and yet taking it further and reading is simply too much effort. I've encountered too many people who profess to be fans of the genre who aren't even aware that the magazine outlets for sf *exist*."

Caroline Clune from Washington, D.C., wrote to let us know how much she liked the magazine (after reading the survey, she wanted to check in as a younger reader who enjoyed what we were doing), and she added this comment. "You...only confirmed the fears which I developed at the lack of readership in the high school I go to. Sigh. GREAT remorse. (They don't know what they're missing!)"

W.B. (Blake) Smith sent a long and reasoned letter about the future

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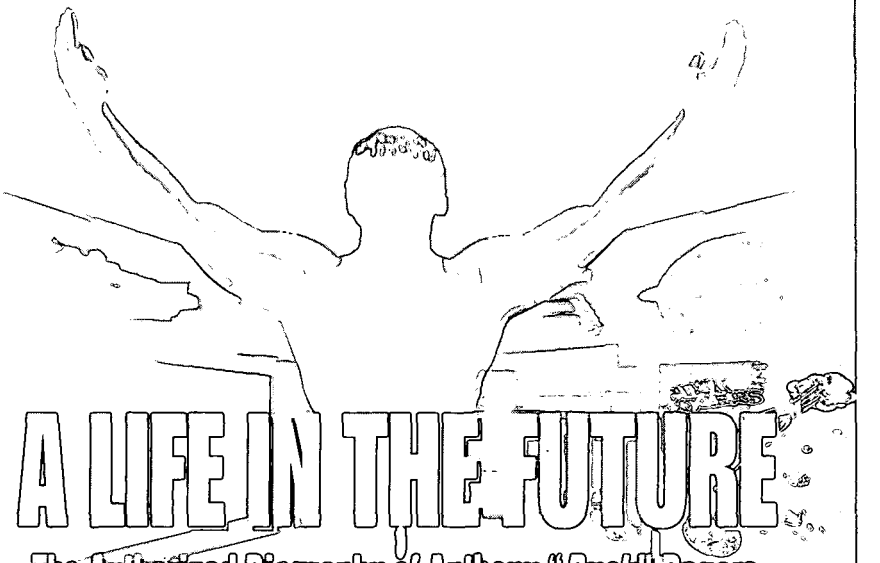

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of sf fiction. I will excerpt as much as I can. He writes: "I'm not a statistician by any means, but I do spend a large quantity of time in book stores and feel qualified to comment on this particular trend.

"I think the youth of America still read. All you have to do is check the sales on teen-romances and teen-horror tales to see that the market is still there. Unfortunately, the appeal of Sci-Fi is largely being filled by non-literary media for today's teens and young adults. The thrill of reading about robots and space-ships is lessened mightily by comparison to the thrill of flying an electronic simulator on your '64-bit MegaFunMaster.' Why read about other planets when you can play an interactive Virtual game based on exploring an entire solar-system. It is my sincere belief that electronic media is killing the Sci-Fi sales to young people....

"If any books are going to bring the young back into the fold, it will be writing like Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* and the works of other comic writers who are lifting that format to new heights. However, I don't think it will be books that bring readers away from electronics. I believe that it will be electronics that eventually take readers away from books. This isn't a bad thing in my mind. It's not what the story is written on, but rather the story itself which leaves the final impression. Sci-Fi will never die because there will always be a tomorrow we can't see and a yesterday we wish different."

Amen.

Thank you everyone who responded to my query. I will give this information time to filter, continue to explore possibilities, and to share them when I get a chance.

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"Points of Departure" marks Pat Murphy's first appearance in F&SF since "Going Through Changes" in April of 1992. Pat's short fiction has won a Nebula award and a World Fantasy award. Her books have won the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award and the Nebula Award. She is currently working on her fourth novel, an historical feminist werewolf novel, called Traveling West: An American Story.

Points of Departure

By Pat Murphy

JAN FIRST HEARD WOLVES howling in the streets of Manhattan on the night of the blackout.

It was two in the morning, but Jan was awake. She had been lying in bed watching the all-news cable station on TV. For the third time that night, a well-dressed newscaster was telling her about a sniper in a Miami shopping mall. Distraught over his divorce, the man had opened fire with a rifle, picking off six women shoppers and a saleslady before the police apprehended him. The blackout cut the announcer off in mid-sentence.

Just before the lights went out, Jan had been crying. A month before, Dennis, her husband, had said that he wanted a divorce, and that unexpected event had shattered the rhythms of her life. "I'm leaving," he had said. And then he said many other things — about finding himself, about feeling trapped, about being confused, about love. But of that storm of words only two had stayed with her: "I'm leaving."

In the end, since the condominium that they shared belonged to him, she had been the one to leave, subletting an apartment in the Village from a friend

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who was vacationing in Florida. Jan lived out of a suitcase and fed her friend's two cats, who regarded her as a convenient source of food and no more. The cats prowled around her bed and on her bed, pouncing on her feet when she shifted position and staring at her in the flickering light of the television.

After Jan had left her husband, she realized that she had forgotten how to sleep. She found herself sitting up late at night, watching TV. Sometimes she drank brandy to put herself in a drifting hazy state from which she could nod off. Sometimes the murmur of the television lulled her to sleep. But she always slept badly.

On the night that the lights went out, Jan sat for a moment in the darkness, then got out of bed and went to the window to see if the lights were out across the street. That was when she heard the wolves.

First, the sound of distant barking — maybe someone's dog disturbed by the sudden darkness. Then the animal began to howl, starting low and rising slowly to a high-pitched wailing note. Others joined in with wavering voices, each on a slightly different pitch.

No lights shone in the surrounding buildings. The streetlights were out. Moonlight glistened on the fire escape outside her window, reflected from the empty windows of the apartment building across the way.

Jan opened the window and listened. A trick of the wind, she thought. But the howling rose and fell in a chorus that was unrelated to the wind. Wolves in the streets of Manhattan. She shivered and closed the window.

When she dialed 911, a woman's voice answered.

"There are wolves in the street," Jan said. "I can hear them howling."

"What is the nature of your 911 emergency?" the woman asked. She sounded bored.

"I can hear wolves howling," Jan repeated. "Not far away."

"Noisy dogs do not constitute an emergency," the woman said briskly. "Contact Animal Control during normal business hours."

"But I can hear...." Jan was speaking to the dial tone.

She hung up and listened at the window again. The wind sang through the latticework of the fire escape and a taxi passed by in the street below. Again she heard howling, a little nearer now.

She hesitated, then dialed her husband's number. She imagined him fumbling for the telephone on the bedside table, his eyes half-closed, his body naked under the covers. She imagined the click as he switched on the bedside

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light, a brass lamp that she had bought at an antique shop a few months ago. She was reassured just by the sound of his sleepy hello.

She said nothing. Since she left him, she had called him every now and then — maybe once a week, no more than that. She did not want to talk to him; she only wanted to hear his voice. Each time, she swore she would not call him again, but her resolve always failed.

"Hello," he said again. She listened to the sound of his breathing, but she did not speak. What would she tell him? The power was out. Wolves were howling in the street. What would he say? He would tell her that she was just letting her imagination run away with her. He would tell her not to call. It was best just to listen to his voice, visualizing the bedroom that she had once thought of as her own.

"Who the hell is this?" he demanded. "God damn it, will you say something?" Finally he swore and slammed down the phone. The dial tone returned. She hung up the phone and returned to the window. She could no longer hear the wolves.

She lit the candle that she kept by the bed. By the flickering light, she wrapped herself in a blanket and lay down to listen for howling on the wind. She was still awake when the power returned at four o'clock and the television came to life. A talk show was on and a psychologist was discussing stress. "Inability to sleep is one symptom of stress," he was saying. Jan fell asleep, listening to him chatter.

She slept through her alarm the next morning and woke up half an hour late, groggy from lack of sleep. The candle had burned itself out and an "I Love Lucy" rerun was on. The cats yowled at her and she dumped dry cat food in their dish. Hurriedly, she dressed and walked four blocks to the subway station. As she walked, her breath made clouds of steam in the cold air.

The temperature in the subway station was tropical, the humid air heavy with pungent odors. The advertisements that hung on the white tiled walls had been decorated with spray paint in jungle colors: great slashes of green; brilliant reds and blues, like the plumage of exotic birds.

As Jan waited for her train, she noticed an old woman wandering down the platform, peering into the face of each commuter she passed. The woman wore a man's overcoat and scuffed black shoes. Her hair, as gray and tangled as rag paper stuffing, spilled from beneath her knit cap. In one hand, she

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carried a pink plastic shopping bag crammed full of clothing. As she drew near, Jan could hear her muttering to herself. Jan looked away, pretending great interest in the advertisement across the way.

The smiling woman in a cigarette ad had been artfully disfigured by a graffiti artist: her ears were slightly pointed and tipped with tufts of fur; her smile had been subtly altered — the teeth sharpened with a careful touch of paint.

"They come out at night," the old woman said, stepping between Jan and the advertisement. "Out of the dark." The woman's eyes were the muddy brown of coffee that's been left in the pot too long and her hands moved in an uneven rhythm that was unrelated to her words. She glanced down suddenly, as if startled by the movement of her own hands. There was a smear of red spray paint on the cement at her feet and she stared at it fixedly. "Blood of the beast," she said and then she lifted her eyes and regarded Jan with an unnerving smile.

"It's just paint," Jan said.

The old woman shook her head and continued smiling. Though she had not asked for money, Jan fumbled in the bottom of her purse for change and spilled her findings into the woman's hand: a crumpled dollar bill, a quarter, a couple of dimes.

The woman's eyes lingered on Jan's face. "They come out at night and no one knows where they go," she muttered dreamily. Her smile grew broader, a wide unthinking grin. "No one knows." She laughed, a high brittle sound, like glass bottles shattering on a city street.

Jan backed away from the woman and the rumble of an approaching train drowned out the laughter. Jan fled on the train. When she looked back through the steamy window, the old woman waved and Jan looked away.

JAN HAD a temporary position in a legal office, typing endless briefs into a word processor. She worked in a small windowless cubicle at the back of the office. Through the cubicle's open door, she could see men in suits hurry up and down the hall on their way to meetings. She typed, letting the words flow through her without touching her as they passed. She ate lunch alone, sitting by the window of the coffee shop and trying to think of nothing. She made it through the day.

That evening, she met her friend Marsha after work. Jan and Marsha had

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attended the same small college in upstate New York. Jan had called Marsha when Dennis first said he was leaving. After Jan moved out, Marsha had insisted on getting together at least once a week. Marsha had been through a divorce and she said she knew what Jan was going through. Marsha bullied Jan to a certain extent, but Jan tolerated that with good grace: she liked the flamboyant dark-haired woman.

She met Marsha at an Italian restaurant. Marsha, who was perpetually dieting, ordered pasta, then agonized over her decision. "You'll have to eat half of it," she told Jan. "You must have dropped ten pounds since you left Dennis. You're so lucky." Marsha regarded any weight loss as fortunate, whatever the cause.

"I haven't been hungry lately," Jan said.

"I can always eat," Marsha claimed. "Especially when I'm miserable."

Jan shook her head. "I just don't feel like eating."

Marsha studied Jan's face. "You've got to get your mind off him. Get out and do things. Meet new people."

"I don't think about him much," Jan said, and it wasn't really a lie. She lay awake at night not thinking, her mind filled with white noise. She did not think about anything.

Jan drank too much red wine and listened to Marsha's heartfelt advice. After a few bites of pasta she felt nauseous, but the wine eased the tension that knotted her stomach. The wine made talking easier, shrinking the world to an intimate circle that included only her, Marsha, and the waiter who refilled their glasses.

"I can't sleep at night," Jan told Marsha. "I hear sounds in the street."

"What kind of sounds?"

Jan hesitated, then plunged ahead. "The other night, I heard wolves howling."

"A neighbor was probably watching a horror movie on TV," Marsha said. "That's all."

"There was a blackout," Jan said stubbornly. "No TV."

"Then it was teenagers howling under your window. Or a bunch of drunks, trying to sing. You hear all kinds of weird stuff in New York at night. Nothing to worry about."

Jan fidgeted with her wine glass. "I'm afraid all the time. All the time. In the apartment at night; in the subway; when I'm walking to work. All the time."

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Marsha reached across the table to pat Jan's hand. "It's hard to get used to being alone."

Jan noticed that her hand was in a fist, and she made an effort to relax. "Things are out of control," she said softly. "I don't know what's going on anymore. I don't know who I am. When Dennis was with me, I didn't worry. Now I worry all the time."

"You're spending too much time alone," Marsha said. "I'll tell you what — I'm going to an art show on Thursday night. The artist is a friend of mine. He's a nut, but the opening will be fun. We can both get dressed to the teeth. Why don't you come with me?"

Jan shook her head. "I don't have anything to wear. I left most of my clothes at the condominium. I escaped with one suitcase and my life." She tried to laugh, but it sounded wrong.

"You can borrow one of my dresses. I have a great little basic black number that will fit you just fine."

"I don't know."

"We're going," Marsha said. "And that's that."

It was late when they finally called for the check. Outside the restaurant, snow was falling — great flakes that drifted lazily down and melted when they hit the pavement. Marsha hailed a cab. At first, she insisted that Jan take it, but for once Jan prevailed. "You take it — I'll catch another." Marsha acquiesced at last, and Jan waved goodbye.

She hesitated for a moment, glad of the cold air on her face. Another taxi passed, but she did not hail it. She wanted, for reasons that were not clear to her, to take the subway. Neon signs were lit and the colors reflected from the wet asphalt, making glistening streams of color. She liked the darkness and the cold and the neon red reflections that ran like blood on the street.

The subway entrance was marked with tall old-fashioned green-tinted streetlights. A straight-backed woman dressed in Salvation Army blue was standing by the stairs, handing out leaflets. Without thinking, Jan accepted a leaflet and hurried down the grimy stairs into a hallway that stank of urine.

Only a few people were waiting on the platform. A teenager in a dirty denim jacket lounged against one of the pillars. A bag lady lay on a wooden bench, her head cushioned on a shopping bag filled with old clothes. An elderly man sat at the end of the bench, resting his head in his hands.

One of the fluorescent lights over the platform had been broken: bits of

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glass glittered in the rubbish that had accumulated near the station's tiled wall. Another light had burned out. The platform was filled with shadows.

Jan stood with her back to one of the pillars by the tracks, staring into the darkness from which the train would emerge. The wine had filled her head with a humming that would not stop. Though she waited here each day for the train home from work, the station seemed unfamiliar. She found herself staring at the graffiti on the walls, trying to puzzle out the meaning of the illegible words. On a level that she did not want to acknowledge, she felt that the scrawled letters held a message for her. The graffiti shifted and moved before her eyes.

In the dim light, her hearing seemed exceptionally keen. She heard the crackle of paper as the bag lady shifted her head on her shopping-bag pillow, the rasp of a match as the teenager lit a cigarette, the hoarse whisper of the old man's breathing. She thought she heard him say something, but she caught only a few words.

"...safe in the tunnels," he murmured. "...warm and dark..."

Jan glanced at him, but he was talking to no one. His head was in his hands and he was staring fixedly at the tracks. She turned away, keeping her back to the pillar.

"...can't find us here," sighed another voice. Jan glanced back and saw the bag lady shift on her bench.

Another voice, just as soft, joined the bag lady's muttering. "We come out at night," the teenager said.

Jan pressed her back to the pillar. She did not look around. The station was filled with whispering voices that ebbed and flowed like wind in the trees. She caught fragments of sentences — or did she imagine the words.

"...place to hide," the bag lady said.

"...come out at night," whispered the man.

Jan heard the distant rumble of a train and stared into the darkness, watching for the first glow of the headlight.

"...good hunting," murmured the teenager.

The train pulled into the station and Jan flung herself into an empty car. Harsh light shone on molded plastic seats and graffiti-decorated walls; there was a faint smell of old cigarette butts and piss. Through the dirty glass of the window, Jan looked back at the platform. The teenager smiled as the train pulled away.

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Jan sat on the plastic seat and blinked at the darkness that rushed past the windows. An unintelligible voice announced the coming station. She rocked with the motion of the train.

The train pulled into a station. The doors opened and closed. The train was pulling out when she saw a poster on the station wall. "MARK OF THE WOLF," it said, but the words flashed past the train and were gone before she could read more.

She pressed her face to the glass, but saw only darkness. Beyond the glass, she thought, there is no world. Just darkness. She could imagine any world she chose — any world. She closed her eyes and thought about the world she would create. In the darkness of her mind, wolves ran through the darkened tunnel, keeping pace with the train.

She opened her eyes as the train slowed for the next station. Lights appeared outside the window, creating a new world of glistening tile and advertisements. She did not see any posters that said "MARK OF THE WOLF," but she got off the train and caught an uptown train to the station she had passed.

She could not find the poster though she walked up and down the empty platform, staring at each advertisement. After the train pulled out, the only sound in the station was the tapping of her footsteps. The tunnels stretched away into the darkness. Anything could hide there.

She felt her heart beating quickly, but she could not tell whether it was from fear or excitement. When she closed her eyes, she could feel the air pressing close around her, warm and filled with unidentifiable smells. She lingered in the shadows at the far end of the platform, staring into the tunnel and breathing in the aroma of the darkness. She found herself listening, straining her ears to hear something. She did not know what she was listening for. From the direction of the turnstile, she heard footsteps, and she glanced back toward the brightly lit section of the platform.

The colors were gone from the advertisements, the benches, the graffiti on the walls. The scene was painted in black and white and shades of gray. She blinked, wondering if this were some trick of the light.

"Hey, lady," called the guard. He stood under the light, his feet set slightly apart, his head tilted at an aggressive angle. "What're you doing there?"

"Waiting," she said, not moving from the shadows.

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"No sleeping on the platform," he said. "None of that here."

She watched him. His face was shiny with sweat and she could smell his fear. "Who comes out at night?" she asked him.

"What?"

"Who comes out at night?"

He said nothing. The train came and she got on. She stared out at the darkness and imagined a new world, constructing it from the shades of night.

THAT NIGHT, she felt restless. The borrowed apartment was not her home. Her clothes were still in her suitcase: she had never unpacked. The closet and the bureau drawers were filled with her friend's clothes. Jan was temporary, a transient guest who would come and go without leaving a trace of her passage. She did not belong here.

In the pocket of her coat, she found the flier that the Salvation Army woman had thrust into her hand. It was badly printed on cheap stock, and the letters were smeared where her fingers had rubbed them. The text was littered with exclamation points and loud with religious exhortations: "DOOMSDAY IS NEAR! Behold! Beware! Be Watchful! Satan's evil dominion is rampant. You must choose between light and darkness. Do not go down into the darkness without Jesus in your heart. Let Jesus be the torch that lights your way. ARE WE MEN OR ARE WE BEASTS? Accept the Lord into your heart and renounce the ways of the beast."

Yes, she thought, they dwell in darkness. The tunnels are dark and very private.

At three that morning, she called Dennis. She stood at the window, looking out as she listened to the phone ring. In the glass, she could see her own reflection. Her eyes were enormous; her pupils dilated. Outside, it was snowing. The phone rang twenty times before he finally picked it up. She did not speak, but listened as he swore into the receiver. His voice did not reassure her as it once had. He sounded muffled and far away.

She hung up and listened to the wolves howling in the street, a chorus of keening voices raised to serenade the waxing moon. She opened the window to let the sound enter the apartment.

The cats watched her nervously. The howling sang in her blood, agonizingly sweet and piercingly high, rising and falling like the wind. She

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paced to and fro in the tiny apartment, and the cats stared at her. The larger of the two followed her, meowing as he twined between her legs. At last, tired of his persistence, she throttled him, closing her hands around his throat softly, then applying pressure. It seemed, in that moment, like the right thing to do. The dying animal struggled, but she did not release her hold. She put the warm body in the kitchen trash. The other cat hid beneath the bed and made no sound.

That night, she turned down the sound on the television. She lay awake and listened, her eyes wide. She wanted to run through the streets, to race through the night toward some unknown goal. In the darkness of the room that was not hers, she smiled, thinking of the subway tunnels where secret creatures lived.

The next morning, she found paw prints in the snow beneath her window. The snow had melted in most places, but on the sidewalk beneath Jan's window, there was a patch that had lingered. The first set of prints was joined by another, and then by a third. For half a block, she followed them. Then the paw prints were obliterated by the footprints of commuters, and she went down the subway stairs alone.

On the side of the train that took her to work, someone had painted a running wolf. Gray and black, with slashes of red for the eyes. She boarded that car and puzzled over the graffiti on her way to work. If she squinted, she thought she could almost read it — not read the letters perhaps, but figure out the sense of it. Something about darkness and silence. Something about freedom and pain.

Marsha bustled around the studio apartment, fixing coffee and talking about the art opening. Jan sat on the couch, watching the snow fall outside. The apartment smelled faintly of perfume and powder.

"You just don't give yourself a chance," Marsha said. "You need to explore. Experiment. Really let yourself go wild."

Jan studied the coffee in her cup. The cream formed white swirls, like hurricanes viewed from space. "I'm thinking of going away," she told Marsha.

Her friend was rummaging in the closet, looking for the dress she wanted Jan to wear. "Going where?"

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Jan shrugged. "Away."

"I could use a vacation myself," Marsha said. "Bermuda maybe? Ah, here it is!" She pulled a black dress from the closet. "I bought it on sale. I've been trying to diet down a size, but I just can't fit into it."

At Marsha's insistence, Jan put on the dress. Marsha put up Jan's hair and applied eye liner and shadow to her eyes. "You can't look until I'm done. Oh, you look so good."

Jan was startled by her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes had a faintly carnivorous look. Her lips were red — Marsha's choice of lipstick.

They took a cab to the gallery. Staring out the window, Jan saw the reflected image of her own face: red lips, dark eyes. She listened to the hiss of the cab's tires against the wet pavement. She was cold — the fur wrap that Marsha had loaned her was for show, not warmth — but the cold was a distant feeling, somehow unreal. She liked the feel of the fur against her shoulders.

The gallery was warm and crowded. She drank a glass of white wine — then another. She lost track of Marsha in the crowd and wandered through the gallery, stopping before each painting. The images were dark and violent: a tattooed man with the head of a dog; a group of punks in the subway, their eyes glowing in the dim light; a naked woman running down a dark street, her body silver in the moonlight, her shadow twisted and misshapen. Jan shivered when she saw that one, but she studied it for a long time while people moved past her, chatting about the artist's painterly technique, his use of mythic themes.

She met the artist when she was getting her third glass of wine. He was a tall, dark-haired man who talked in a low voice about art and life. "There are people who live on the surface of life, never seeing beyond the illusions of daily existence. Then there are some who see past the sham. Those are the people who see the truth in my work."

He leaned close as he spoke and let his hand rest softly, as if by accident, on her bare shoulder. She nodded. He seemed to be saying exactly what she had wanted to tell Marsha. She was considering telling him about the wolves when Dennis interrupted the conversation.

"Jan?" Dennis said. "I didn't expect to see you here. I almost didn't recognize you."

She studied him for a moment. His eyes looked bleary and his shirt needed ironing. His voice was too loud, and she guessed that the glass of wine

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in his hand was not his first. She smiled without warmth and introduced him to the artist as her ex-husband. The artist did not remove his hand from her shoulder.

"I've been trying to call you," Dennis said. "Seems like you're never home."

She shrugged. She did not tell him that she was often home. In the last week, she had chosen to stop answering the phone. She preferred to let it ring while she gazed out the window into the night.

"Dennis!" Marsha's voice cut through the babble of conversation. She was bearing down on them, intent on rescuing Jan from an awkward situation. "Since when have you been interested in art?"

Jan listened to their conversation and watched them as she had watched the falling snow. She was separated from them by a pane of glass. Marsha waved a hand on which ivory bangles rattled and Jan heard the noise from a great distance.

In the cab ride home, Marsha said, "Oh, he was eating his heart out. He was. What do you want to bet you'll be hearing from him?"

"Jan?" said Dennis' voice. He had caught her at work, where she had to answer the phone. "I thought maybe...It was good seeing you last night. Would you like to go out to dinner sometime? I'd like to talk."

"Talk?" Her voice felt rough and unused. She had not slept the night before, and that morning, when she dressed for work, her clothes had felt strange against her skin.

Dennis was saying something. "...know you must think I'm a jerk, but I miss you. I don't know. When I saw you last night, I guess I realized...."

He went on and she stared at the blank wall of her cubicle, thinking of nothing.

"How about tonight?" he asked. "I could meet you after work."

"All right," she said. "Tonight."

"I've changed since you left me," she told him over dinner. He didn't seem to understand. He seemed clumsier than she remembered him, more awkward.

One thing led to another: dinner to drinks, drinks to her borrowed apartment. He came up for a nightcap. She hoped that he would not look in the kitchen trash where the body of the cat still lay, curled as if asleep.

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The bed creaked beneath their weight as they made love. She noticed, as he kissed her, that she did not like the way he smelled. His hair and skin smelled of soap and skin lotion, a sweet clean scent that she found disturbing. His skin was too smooth, too clean.

Dennis was asleep when the moon rose, but Jan lay awake. She knew that the moon was rising, she knew it even before the howling began. Her husband slept beside her, his breathing steady and undisturbed. The air in the apartment was stuffy — warm and stinking of cats. The distant howling touched her with urgency.

She slipped from the bed silently and opened the curtain to let in the light. "I'm leaving," she said softly, but Dennis' soft breathing did not change.

She opened the window and stepped out onto the fire escape. She was naked. Her bare feet melted the snow that had settled on the metal platform. The metal was cold against her feet, the air icy on her bare skin, but these were distant pains, like something that had happened long ago. Deep within her, she could feel a change — a shift in allegiance, a trade of light for dark. This, she was certain, was what she had been waiting for all along.

The wolves came from the shadows and the moonlight caught in their silver fur. They sat in a circle, looking up at her expectantly. She knew that they were waiting for her to join them.

On the fire escape's last landing, she hesitated, suddenly noticing the gold wedding band on her hand. She took it off and left it balanced on the metal railing. Quietly, without hurrying, she descended to the street. The falling snow filled in the marks of her bare feet.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Vurt by Jeff Noon, Crown, 342 pp, $22.00

The Diamond Age by Neal Stephenson, Bantam, 456 pp, $22.95

SEVERAL years ago I read a flip little book called *Lingo* by Jim Menick. It's the story of a regular guy who invents a robot which tries to take over the world, and I found myself almost from page one grinding my teeth as the author walked his reader smugly through a plot that would have seemed old when *Astounding* was young, addressing questions about machine intelligence with the depth of a 1950s textbook (that is, none), all the while maintaining a self-satisfied tone which made it clear that he thought he'd invented all of this stuff.

If Menick had written with more awareness of those who had covered similar ground before, *Lingo* might have seemed at worst a cute, lighthearted bit of fluff; as it was, the book seemed almost insulting. Fortunately, I was in a position at the time to review the book, and I did so, figuring that once my hatchet-job appeared the book would sink quietly out of sight.

Imagine my surprise when, a few weeks later, a review of *Lingo* appeared in *The New York Times*, written by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, a man of rigidly anti-genre tastes if ever there was one. And he was raving about it! He loved *Lingo*, found it oh so inventive, engaging, and relevant. He didn't seem to know that all of *Lingo*'s ideas had been floating around the sf world for decades, and most of them had even penetrated the common consciousness by then through films such as *2001*, *Star Wars*, and *Blade Runner*.

Now, when a galley of Jeff Noon's *Vurt* comes my way, decorated with several gleeful blurbs from mainstream reviewers saying how much better it is than William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, it's very tempting to throw the thing across the room. Is this another *Lingo*? Another case in which a bunch of mainstream critics welcome as a messiah a non-sf writer

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who introduces them to concepts already a generation old to genre readers? It would have been unfair to Noon to damn him unread based on past experience, though, so I decided to give *Vurt* a chance.

The good news is it's not just another lazy mainstream ensemble of outdated sf tropes, and it's not really like any of the other things (*A Clockwork Orange*, anything by William Gibson) that its jacket blurbs compare it to. The bad news is it's probably not as good as any of those other books, either. But the best news is that *Vurt* does have a kind of free-wheeling energy, a bouquet of unusual and evocative images, and a distictive feel and voice that make me glad I didn't hurl it windowwards out of prejudice.

The book opens with one of those images, which will become the central leitmotif of the text: "A young boy puts a feather into his mouth..." And we're plunged into the world of Scribble and his gang, the Stash Riders, a near-future Manchester where most people are unemployed, living off the "dripfeed," and whiling away the hours tripping on the drug *du jour*, Vurt. A strange hybrid of chemical fix and virtual-reality interactive, Vurt comes in the form of feathers with names like "Thermo Fish" and "English Voodoo." A little taste sends users into a shared dreamworld experience that's not entirely virtual — things, including people, are sometimes lost to the Vurt and exchanged for alien entities, such as the poisonous dreamsnakes haunting the novel's shadows.

Though the Stash Riders seem to do little but seek out new Vurt experiences, Scribble (so named because he likes to write, of all things) has a personal quest: his beloved (perhaps *too* beloved) sister Desdemona vanished into a Vurt trip, replaced by a shapeless alien creature they call the Thing-from-Outer-Space. Scribble searches for the fabled Curious Yellow feather, which should give him a chance to trade the Thing back for Desdemona. Meanwhile the Stash Riders clash with the cops, go to ground, break up and regroup, and the tale is laced with excerpted advice from the mysterious Game Cat, the guru of the Vurt, whose commentary serves as a guide to the "rules" of Vurt trips.

At heart *Vurt* is a typical genre quest story, and Noon even draws here and there on the flavor and the props of quest fantasy. An early clash between the Stash Riders and a sorcerous "Shadowgoth" reads at times like something out of a standard fantasy adventure: "She thrust forwards, the blade glittering. It entered Beetle's flesh, the left side of his stomach. He fell back, his mouth

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open, his eyes wide and staring." (No one has accused Noon of scripting great action sequences, and I'm not going to be the first.) One venture into the Vurt becomes a very explicit fantasy quest "'into the jasmine valley of the dreamsnakes,'" where the Stash Riders must recover the queen's earrings from the King of the Nagas. Pure heroic fantasy stuff, and in spots Noon's prose sounds like something out of *Beowulf*: "They were coming in hundreds, but so tightly knotted, it would take more than a human span to count them."

But Noon's fevered writing shifts like sand underfoot, from the stylized fantasy mode to scrappy streetspeak in a half-breath. One moment it's "Some dreamsnakes died that night, let me tell you," and the next it's "We didn't get Takshaka, King Snake, but we hammered some bad fucker cronies. And we got those earrings back, and delivered." Sometimes his voice falls oddly quiet — "It smelt like the ripest fruit, but tasted like wine, and it touched our cuts with a sweet hand" — and at others it's an amphetamized breathless patter: "We were in jam mode, screaming down the back roads, all rattling around in the van. Me, the Thing, Brid and Mandy. Beetle at the wheel, jammed up to the nines."

The same sort of tension underlies his (often irritatingly inconsistent) portrayal of the Vurt. In some ways it's nothing but a designer drug, an ephemeral ride without real-world repercussions; but then there's lost Desdemona, and the Game Cat's explanation of "Hobart's rule," the equation which governs the exchanges between the "real" and Vurt worlds. On the one hand the Vurt worlds seem to be independent alternate realities, but on the other they're clearly artificial commercial entities (complete with "advurts" and credit sequences, like a video game). We never get a sense of the Vurt we can feel sure of, and maybe that's at least partially intentional, but to a genre reader it can become tiresome. It's almost more frustrating that Noon makes nods in the direction of a kind of "hard sf" approach to the Vurt, with the Hobart equation and the Game Cat's exegesis, only to leave it vague and undefined in the end.

In fact, *Vurt* is at its best when Noon doesn't try to play the genre's usual games at all, when he simply lets his imagination run without trying to "do" sf. Gestures such as a mention of "Interactive Madonna at Woodstock Seven" or a breakfast of "JFK flakes" merely point out the flimsiness of his imagined future, and without them it would be much more tempting to go along with his trippy dream-logic (which can be genuinely amusing).

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Not to say there are no neat science-fictional items in Vurt. The "Cortex Jammers" Beetle uses to drive instinctively, without the interference of rational thought, could have come out of a Gibson or Rucker book. When Scribble and the others pay a visit to the home of several genetically engineered human/dog mixes, they find that the doorbell can't be heard by human ears (a nice touch). But for every one of those there's a misstep that jolts the reader out of the story: Scribble wonders whether an owl he hears hooting is "Real, Vurt, or robo," but why on Earth would anyone make robo-owls? (I can imagine several reasons, but Noon gives us none.) He goes to a reception party where the food includes "the tiny wings of larks, stewed in pig's blood" and "the encrusted eyes of virgin lambs, smothered in dark filaments of horse bread, deep fried in shadow oil," which sound like the kind of cheap gross-out that filled the pages of old *Tales from the Crypt* comics.

In the end, *Vurt* is something of a disappointment for the sf reader. Noon never engages any of his ideas intellectually, never brings the conceptual rigor to bear that we expect from science fiction. He uses science-fictional elements as gags, because they sound or feel good, not because they make any particular sense. His future world never comes alive nor achieves any depth, because his characters don't respond much to their environment. When Scribble confronts the human/dog crossbreeds, we expect some reaction, some opinion — after all, it's not supposed to be that far in the future — but Noon plays it straight, without comment. None of his characters ever wonders about their world, their dependence on Vurt, how things might have gotten this way. Scribble does have to sacrifice finally in order to save Desdemona, which adds a measure of depth to his quest, but since we never learn much more about Scribble's or Desdemona's character, it's too little too late.

Vurt is a book of two selves, two personalities married unquietly. Noon weds epic fantasy prose to jazzy impressionistic sentences; he dabbles in genre concepts but refuses to approach them with any conceptual depth. When it works, *Vurt*'s two selves blend into a slick gestalt thing more interesting than either alone; when it fails, those dichotomous selves grind against each other like a clutch caught between second and third. Noon totters through his book like an amateur juggler airing too many balls — now and then, when he's got them up, it's wonderful and exhilirating to watch, but before the moment can firmly gel one ball col-

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lides with another, bounces off his head, and the magic instant collapses.

Neal Stephenson is quickly assuming the mantle of cyberpunk ambassador to the world, in some cases displacing William Gibson (who never much seemed to care for the role anyway). Stephenson's third novel, *Snow Crash*, became a sensation both in and out of the field, and since then he's been on the cover of *Wired* and appeared as the featured fiction writer in *Time* magazine's recent special "Welcome to Cyberspace" issue (following in the footsteps of Arthur C. Clarke, whose story "The Hammer of God" ran in *Time* a couple of years ago).

The Diamond Age, Stephenson's latest novel, both confirms his position among the wired set and simultaneously distances him from the center of the neocyberpunk microculture. While it is centrally concerned with the power of computer technology (and particularly that of interactive educational devices), *The Diamond Age* is much more focused on the influence nanotechnology could have on the future. And the novel is built largely around a core of explicitly utopian speculation — hardly typical of other cyberpunk work.

Stephenson's future (sometime in the 22nd century) finds the nanotech revolution in full swing. Molecular engineers can manufacture just about anything out of the raw materials provided by the "Feed." Every home has a "matter compiler" (MC) which delivers any required object on demand, so a great many people (as in *Vurt*) live lives of indolence, entertaining themselves with "ractives" and petty thuggery. It's a world in which nation-states are little more than an echo; people have regrouped into various "phyles" based on religious or political ideals, racial or ethnic ties, or some other principle. Among the top two or three phyles is the New Atlantans, or neo-Victorians, who have, in reaction against the moral centerlessness of the late 20th century, adopted a social system founded on the customs of self-restraint, formality, and romanticized chivalry of the 19th.

John Percival Hackworth, a New Atlantan engineer, receives a commission from one of the phyle's highest-ranking officials, Lord Alexander Chung-Sik Finkle-McGraw, to design a fantastic educational tool, the *Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*, for the refinement of his granddaughter. Hackworth sees in it his chance to improve the lot of his own daughter — by making an illegal copy of the Primer before turning it over to Finkle-McGraw. But he's mugged while carrying the copy

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home, and it falls instead into the hands of a little girl of the underclass, Nell.

From then on the narrative alternates with sequences of Nell's experiences with the Primer; first it teaches her how to read, then it begins to educate her from the bottom up, not just in the usual academic subjects but also in martial arts, woodland survival skills, and other practical matters. (The Primer's lessons take the form of fairy tales and mythic quests; Stephenson, like Noon, bases his interactive world on the stuff of genre fantasy, yet he — unlike Noon — abandons all of the characteristic flavor of that mode, choosing instead to tell the Primer's tales in the same contemporary voice of the rest of the narrative.) As the novel progresses Nell moves from her slum home into a satellite enclave of the New Atlantis colony, and eventually enters a neo-Victorian school for girls, becoming a schoolmate of none other than Hackworth's daughter and Lord Finkle-McGraw's granddaughter. Clearly, before the tale is done, Nell is destined for great things, thanks to the Primer.

The Primer is a delightful idea, a book-like object which is actually a more powerful computer than anything imaginable today, "whose pages were thicker and more densely packed with computational machinery... brought together in a spine that, in addition to keeping the book from falling apart, functioned as an enormous switching system and database." Unlike *Vurt*, *The Diamond Age* is full of dazzling science-fictional ideas, densely packed one atop the other in a kind of extrapolative display rarely seen anymore: one page gives us skull-guns and bone-mounted batteries, the next mentions work houses for credit card delinquents, the next royal airships and gloves made of "infinitesimal fabricules" that eject dirt. Many of these ideas aren't exactly new — sf has been "predicting" clothing and carpets that eat dirt for decades — but Stephenson gives them a nice contemporary turn that makes them more interesting than mere stock elements; for instance, he offers a brief explanation of the dirt-ejecting cloth in terms of current thinking on "smart" materials. (Though Stephenson is widely considered a standard-bearer of hip, postmodern science fiction, he often resorts to one of the hoariest of genre techniques: the infodump.)

The Diamond Age further develops some of the anti-cyberpunk tendencies Stephenson had already shown in *Snow Crash*. The neo-Victorians, for instance, reject some of the staples of current "information superhighway" hype, such as the

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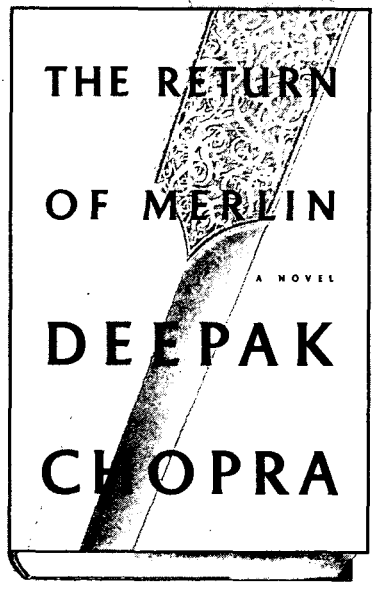
benefits of customized newspapers and entertainment. "One of the insights of the Victorian Revival was that it was not necessarily a good thing for everyone to read a completely different newspaper in the morning; so the higher one rose in the society, the more similar one's *Times* became to one's peers'." Though Stephenson makes a brief, favorable comparison of hackers to godlike Trickster figures out of mythology, and buys into the dubious assumption that interactive art forms will overwhelm "passive" ones (such as books, movies, plays, etc.), he takes a very uncommonly censorious position when it comes to the freedom of information. Many earlier cyberpunk works focus on cyberspace cowboys wresting data from the hands of evil selfish corporations; Stephenson often seems to suggest that he'd much rather keep the information in the hands of the corps than entrust it to the *hoi polloi*.

In fact, *The Diamond Age* (as its very title suggests) is more a utopian novel than cyberpunk. The Primer and the plot surrounding Nell are nothing if not a thought-experiment on the value of education in creating useful, satisfied citizens. But it goes much further and deeper than that. The idea for the Primer is introduced during a discussion between Finkle-McGraw and Hackworth about the

Merlin lives!

....and continues the ancient battle against evil in our time...



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principles of the neo-Victorian society, particularly its rebellion against the moral relativism of the 20th century. Hackworth's plot to copy the Primer brings him into contact with officials of the Chinese state founded on the general principles of Confucius (as retro in its own way as the Victorians, focused on manners and social regimentation). Nell flees her violent home and ends up in the idyllic Dovetail enclave, where everyone produces handmade objects for the neo-Victorians (who consider such things signs of status, not having to rely on matter compilers). For the greater part of the novel Stephenson presents a kind of utopian vision which bears disturbing resemblance to the romantic fantasies of today's conservatives: Dovetail particularly struck me as the evocation of romanticized images of the colonial period, conveniently lacking (because of the wonders of nanotech) all the hardships that went along with that handmade lifestyle.

On the other hand, it's hard not to like the sound of some of this stuff; if nanotech did become the force it is in this book, wouldn't it be nice to have the option of living in a place like Dovetail, of gentle green hillsides and satisfying craftwork? The Confucian philosophy sounds pretty good as well: "From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides." Maybe the retro-utopia, supported by nanotech, could work? (Then again, there's that troublesome hierarchical structure in the Confucian ideal, as there is in the Victorian, and that in the end may be the reason Stephenson's utopian ideas sound fairly unappealing.)

Though the utopian novel may be the earliest form of science fiction, there's something disturbingly counter-science-fictional to the utopianism of *The Diamond Age*, a prevailing assumption that the answers to our problems lie not in the future but in the past. It's hard to see why, given the power of nanotech, items manufactured by the matter compilers should be inherently cheaper-looking and less desirable than the things made by hand in Dovetail, yet Stephenson clearly assumes that they would. When Nell asks the people of Dovetail why they don't just compile the things they want, she's told that the matter compiler can only make "'fake wood,'" not real, and "'some people don't like fake things.'" But with nanotech as powerful as Stephenson describes, that distinction would seem absurd; how could you tell which was "fake" and which was "real"? Making much

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hay over the matter strikes me as a failure of imagination.

And it's by far not the worst such failure in The Diamond Age. Far more glaring — and most indicative of Stephenson's anti-cyberpunk bent — are his close-minded assumptions about the possibilities of AI. A lengthy sequence in Nell's education involves a crash course in computers, from simple principles and basic theory to the complexities of the global communication network. Among other lessons, Nell "learns" that "a Turing machine could not really understand a human being," that no matter how complex "it was not human. It had no soul. It could not do what a human did." Stephenson makes no attempt to back this assertion up, theoretically or otherwise; he simply presents it as a given, and uses it to undermine the brilliant idea of the Primer. The Primer, like other "ractives," relies on live "ractors" to deliver its lines, and so it was really through the love and concern one particular ractor brought to the job that Nell was educated so well. No machine could have done it, says Stephenson — what every child really needs is a devoted mom.

Well, that's as may be — I'd be the last to denigrate the value of a loving parent — but it certainly seems to me a tragic lapse on the part of a science fiction writer to allow preconceived ideas like this to dictate the imaginative reach of a future world. Science fiction, I think, should be about entertaining possibilities, not constructing scenarios to prove that there aren't any. Rather than giving the notion of artificial intelligence an honest try, and making the dangerous speculation that maybe a sufficiently complex interactive machine really could take the place of a parent, Stephenson plays it conservatively, just as he does in his utopian speculations.

Certainly, as I've said, there's a wealth of interesting ideas here, and plenty of genuine brain-stretching science-fictional excitement, but *The Diamond Age* is as disappointing as *Vurt* in its own way. At the crucial junctures, Stephenson is not prepared to make any really interesting imaginative leaps — nor even to offer well-grounded justifications for thinking such leaps are impossible — and in the end, that is the heart and (dare I say it?) soul of the science-fictional enterprise. Stephenson abjures it, and to the extent that he does, he lets us all down.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Sherwood Game, by Esther Friesner, Baen, 1995, 384pp, $5.99, paperback

I THINK Esther Friesner had fun writing this one, for all that it has its serious moments. Oh, it's true her prose often has the light-hearted touch of an author entertaining herself as well as her readers, and *The Sherwood Game* is no exception in that, but there's a strong story happening here as well, independent of the humor.

It begins with a virtual reality computer game based on Robin Hood that Carl Sherwood has designed in his spare time while working for Manifest, Inc., a company that frowns on such frivolous activities. When Sherwood's work is discovered by a co-worker, Laurie Pincus, his troubles are only starting. First he has to share his beloved game with someone else — Pincus, who has her own ideas on how they can improve it. Then the game begins to develop problems on its own, such as the main character, Robin Hood, acquiring artificial intelligence independent of Sherwood's programming, and then escaping the game into the real world by way of one of the life-like "andromechs" that Manifest, Inc., is developing for its clients. An andromech appears, to all intents and purposes, to be human; all it requires to make it mobile is a personality, the way a computer requires software for a program to run.

Things get worse before they get better. Both Pincus and Sherwood's jobs are on the line. Manifest, Inc., turns out to have some darker plans afoot than are morally conscionable, and then there's the matter of Robin Hood being on the loose. For not only has he become independent and "real," he also finagles the escape of his Merry Men, and then they begin to do what they do best — rob from the rich and give to the poor, except they're using the Internet as the King's Highway and living high on the hog in their borrowed bodies.

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Friesner keeps the plot moving smoothly, from one inventive escapade to another, the action switching between our world and the medieval Nottingham that exists only in pixels. And she plays fair with her surprises; every new development has its roots in what went before. My only complaint with the book is that Sherwood's character — central to all that goes on — really isn't very likable. He's weak and self-centered, and while he grows and matures somewhat with his experiences, for too much of the book he's not really somebody in whose company I care to spend my time.

Friesner kept me turning pages because I wanted to find out what happened next, but my curiosity was more for the cleverness of her plot and for the other characters. I kept hoping Sherwood would get bumped off and someone else would take center stage, but no such luck.

On the plus side, it shows the gift of Friesner's characterizing skills that I had such a strong reaction to Sherwood. And who knows, perhaps it won't bother you. That one character aside, *The Sherwood Game* has much good going for it and is certainly worth reading if for nothing else than to see how Robin Hood would deal with the twentieth century — albeit aided by a direct link into the Internet and the ability to acquire what he needs from it at a rate that ordinary mortals could never hope to duplicate.

Always inventive, and certainly difficult to peg down in terms of style, Friesner is at the top of her form for most of this book.

Street, by Jack Cady, St. Martin's Press, 1994, 212pp, $19.95, Hardcover

With *Street*, Jack Cady pulls off a neat authorial trick: it's a multiple-viewpoint novel told in the first person from the various points of view, all of whom — here's the trick — are the same person.

Cady's unnamed protagonist is an actor, disillusioned with his career which has reduced him to shilling product for various advertisers. With a healthy chunk of money in the bank, he quits his old life to take up residence in an abandoned church called The Sanctuary and becomes one of the street people living there, assuming various personae while he lives with them.

What's particularly interesting is that these aren't simple disguises. When he takes on a role, he becomes that person. His diction changes. His memories are those of the character. To all intents and purposes he is that person until something brings him

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out of the role. So he is, variously, an old Indian wino; a woman who, when her children have grown and left home, works in a thrift shop; a pool shark; a retired school teacher — a fully realized cast of characters all on his own.

Living with him in The Sanctuary is yet another fascinating cast of characters: Symptomatic Nerve Gas, a Korean vet who gets his name from declaiming that statement loudly at intersections; an ex-nun named Silk for whom the protagonist carries an unrequited torch; a Southern gentleman named Hal who considers himself to be a knight of old and dresses for the part, complete with broad sword; and an old black poet named Elgin.

The novel is set in the present, in Seattle, a city that has been suffering a plague of unsolved mysterious murders going back ten years before the story begins. When the murderer takes a girl from the street on which The Sanctuary stands and the police still have no leads, the residents of the church begin to track the murderer down on their own — no easy matter, for not only is he or she incredibly clever, a number of the self-appointed posse are convinced they're chasing a demon.

Street is a fascinating journey into the world of these street people, none of whom are romanticized, and a telling exploration in the roles we all take on to make our way through life. Some, such as the street people, assume roles to survive. Others, such as the actor, take on roles to escape themselves. And then there is their serial killer demon, the ultimate consumer, the compulsive shopper taken to the extreme, we come to discover, the more we learn of it.

Cady has written a dark novel, though what else could he do, given the times and his story? But at the same time he posits hope. The trouble is that in fables, as in real life, everything has a price and maintaining a positive outlook and one's belief in one's fellow man can sometimes cost all too dear.

Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come out Tonight, by Ursula K. Le Guin & Susan Seddon Boulet, Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994, 79pp, $16.95, Hardcover

The text to this book isn't new. In fact, it first appeared in the November, 1987, issue of this very magazine. Subsequently, it's been reprinted in various year's best anthologies as well as Le Guin's own collection, *Buffalo Gals And Other Animal Presences* (Raincoast Books, 1987), which, had I been writing this column at the

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time, I would have recommended you run out and buy immediately. The Raincoast Books edition of *Buffalo Gals*, and Le Guin's *Searoad: Chronicle of Klatsand* (HarperCollins, 1991) remain two of my favorite short story collections — old friends that I return to time and again. But I digress.

As I was saying, the text to this book will probably be familiar to most readers. For those of you who haven't had the pleasure of reading it, the story tells of a young girl involved in a plane crash in an American Southwestern desert who gets rescued by Native American totem animals. The prose is lyrical and sharp as a cactus thorn, the characters memorable — particularly Le Guin's take on Coyote, rude and so foolishly wise — while the story itself, with all its asides and bits of sf speculation mixed with Native lore, is a real treat. But "Buffalo Gals" is also about conceptual reality and the exploring of differences — of cultures, of how different sorts of beings communicate, and of the perceptions we have as adults and children. It, along with Jim Blaylock's "Paper Dragons," strike me as perfect examples of North American magical realism, separate and distinct from their South American cousins. Their take on the juxtaposing of the mythic and strange with our world allows us to see the commonplace with new eyes so that we come away from their stories with a sense of the everyday containing previously unnoticed and unexpected depths.

What has me recommending this particular edition of "Buffalo Gals" is the addition of Susan Seddon Boulet's accompanying illustrations to Le Guin's text. Boulet's work will probably be familiar to readers from her Shaman and Goddess paintings that have appeared on various posters, notecards and calendars — surreal collages of images in swirling earth tones that seem to grow in complexity, the longer one studies them.

Le Guin's and Boulet's works found here are expressive and fascinating in their own rights; combined, they form one of those perfect marriages of art and text.

If your local bookstore doesn't carry it, you can write for ordering information to Pomegranate Artbooks, Box 6099, Rohnert Park, CA 94927.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Mario Milosevic wrote his first story for Fantasy & Science Fiction *as a response to his father's death in 1990. Mario writes, "Sometimes people we have lost through death find very effective ways to maintain contact with us. My father...is still with me in many ways: memories, dreams, gestures, stray phrases, all these things can bring him back in an instant."*

Mario's short fiction has appeared in Space and Time, Pulphouse, *and* The Clarion Awards, *an anthology edited by Damon Knight. In addition to his writing, Mario works as managing editor for* Daughters of Nyx, *a magazine published in Skamania, Washington.*

Dead Letters

By Mario Milosevic

CALL ME BARTLEBY. SOME time ago, just after my brother died, I was laid off from my job writing obits at a nowhere newspaper called *The Multnomah Messenger.*

Not having much else going for me, I hooked up with a greeting card company and got assigned to a division called Eternal Messages. We contracted with people to send cards and letters to their survivors after they died.

I was a ghost writer. Kind of. Full name: Bartholomew Lee Burns, but I still didn't get a by-line. I wrote 'em, and dead people signed 'em.

It was a weird job, sure, but it was a living. And listen, we got a lot of people that were just tickled by the idea of sending birthday, anniversary, Christmas, whatever, greetings to their loved ones after they had croaked. We charged twenty-five bucks per message, fifty if you wanted them custom written.

We came and went, we ghost writers, but there were usually three or four of us at any one time, writing dead letters. That's what we called them when

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there weren't clients around to hear us talking. The post office has a place for dead letters, only these were different, these were letters from dead people. Missives from the other side. Quoting one of my own efforts, they went something like this:

My Dearest Angela:
On this most joyous of days,
Please know that I am with you
Even though I'm not around physically,
—I will never leave you.
I pray for the day we can be
together again.
Merry Christmas,
Love,
Always and forever, (and on this subject
I know what I'm talking about, trust me)
—Max

Okay, so I'm no Herman Melville, as my brother never tired of telling me. And I guess it is kind of sick in that one line where Mr. Max Sturges implies he's happily anticipating the day Angela kicks off, but the customer is always right, right? And Max liked it. Hell, he loved it. He ordered up thirty, more or less like that one, and told us to keep sending them every Christmas until those thirty years were up or until poor Angela joined him in that better place we'll all end up in some day. And not only Christmas. Ol' Max sprung for thirty wedding anniversaries, thirty of Angela's birthdays, thirty Mother's Days, thirty Valentine's days and a few random out-of-the-blue, for-no-reason, just-cause-I-love-you cards sprinkled across those three decades.

He was feeling moved by the spirits that day he came in and set the whole thing up. He knew he was dying. Wanted to leave his Angela something that counted. Something from the heart. Max was a real sentimentalist.

I wish I could say the same for Angela. She called me soon after Max's contract kicked in. Well, she called EM. I just answered the phone.

"Eternal Messages," I said. "Bart speaking."

"Is this the place that sends letters from my Max?" A quiet voice, she had. Kind of like a mouse voice. Soft.

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"Epistles from the passed away, that's right."

Then the line went real quiet for a while. Only the hum of the phone line in my ear. I waited a few seconds, tapping my pencil on the desk. "Ma'am?"

"I'd prefer not receiving these cards," she said.

Don't think I hadn't come across this sort of thing before. My brother always said stuff like that. Once he said he didn't want to go on. Said he decided he'd rather not live. He just preferred it that way. I laughed when he said it. I didn't laugh at Angela though. I had my speech ready.

"Not send them?" I said in my most hurt voice. "Your wonderful husband *wanted* us to send them, and we're going to abide by his wishes for as long as you live because he loved you very much and even now he wants you to know that he still loves you." Well, that and the fact that I got a twenty percent commission for every card I wrote. But I didn't collect if we didn't send them.

"I told you," said Angela, "I prefer not receiving these messages. I'm sure some people like this sort of thing, but I don't. Max is dead. I don't want any phony cards and letters from your business pretending to be from him."

I cleared my throat. "It's really uncanny," I said. "He told me you would be like this, but he also told me that I shouldn't listen to you. That you would see things his way and you would come to love his messages."

Angela breathed into the phone. I pressed on.

"I'll bet you've saved the ones you've already received, haven't you?"

Angela said nothing.

"Sure you did," I said. "And you'll want to save them all. I know you will. The memories of you and Max, how could you lose that?"

"But he's not sending them!"

"Technically, that's true. But he arranged to have them sent. He wanted you to have them. He truly did."

More breathing.

I waited.

"I'm too tired to argue with you," she said.

After she hung up I wondered if my arguments convinced her and I remembered the night I sat up with my brother from midnight to dawn explaining to him that life was good, that his depression would pass, that he should prefer to live. I knew I convinced him. I could tell because he laughed at my lame jokes and told me I was wasting my vast talents writing obituaries

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when I could be working in the classified ads department. Ha ha. A lame joke of his own, but it was a sign he was okay. He was going to pull through.

I looked over my work log for the day. There was a Father's Day card, and a few birthdays to do, but my heart wasn't in it. I knocked off early and went home and forgot about Angela and Max and my brother.

A few days later I found an envelope on my desk bearing the following address:

Mr. Maxwell Sturges
c/o Eternal Messages Department
Signature Card Company
Box 1275
Portland, OR 97204

I recognized Angela's return address in the upper left hand corner and stared at the envelope for some time. Maybe Angela Sturges had a sense of humor after all. Or maybe she was trying to say something. I wanted to open the envelope, but stopped myself. It wasn't addressed to me. It was addressed to — a dead man.

My phone buzzed. I picked it up.

"Burns?" It was my boss, the owner of the company.

"Yes Mr. Yost."

"Is there a problem with the Sturges account?"

"Problem? Why no, not at all, I don't think so."

"What's that letter about?"

My collar suddenly seemed uncomfortably tight.

"Nothing, Mr. Yost."

"Have we done something to upset Mrs. Sturges?"

I pondered that one for a couple of seconds. Only if you count sending her mail from the great beyond that she didn't want to get. But we were only doing what we were supposed to do.

"No," I said.

Yost grunted. "What's next for her?"

"We just sent Christmas. Her birthday is in May and their anniversary is July, so Valentine's is next."

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"Make it a good one," said Yost. "Give it your all. We want to win her back. I have a feeling she's upset."

"Yes Mr. Yost. What should I do with the letter?"

"Send it back as undeliverable. And whatever you do, don't open it."

He hung up. Sweat dripped off my forehead. I looked around and found the other ghosts staring at me. They had heard the whole thing. I smiled. "Got a funny one," I said.

They nodded and turned back to their work. We were not a real friendly bunch. Making up cheerful greetings from corpses day after day can make anyone kind of antisocial.

I crossed out the address, wrote "return to sender" on it, and put it in my out basket.

I didn't hear from Angela Sturges for several more days and thought the whole matter had been taken care of.

That's when the flowers came. Same deal as before. Addressed to Max in care of our company. A dozen roses they were, with the following card:

> My dearest Max,
> I'd very much prefer not hearing from
> you again, if it's all the same with
> you. Love you lots,
> xoxoxoxoxo
> Angela

She was no Emily Dickinson, but who was I to criticize? I liked the hugs and kisses, gave it a kind of youthful tone.

Valentine's Day was still over a month away, but I decided ol' Max needed to send something to his sweetheart pronto. I pulled out a fresh legal pad and started writing down some lines.

—Thanks for the flowers.

—Hey! The flowers were wonderful.

—You always knew I loved roses.

Lines like that. I wished I was still writing obits.

I tried a few more.

—How thoughtful of you to send flowers.

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—Your flowers were so wonderful I could just die!!!
I ground my pencil point into the paper and stared off into space.

At home that afternoon I took out my brother's unopened letter, the one I got in the mail three days after I convinced him life was worth living, and two days after his neighbor found him dead in his apartment. An empty bottle of sleeping pills and a drained bottle of whiskey were arranged neatly beside his body. The envelope in my hand bore the following address:

Bart L.B.
c/o Mr. Herman Melville
The Multnomah Messenger
Portland, Oregon

I turned it over and slid my thumb under the flap, breaking the seal. I pulled out the yellow lined page inside and unfolded it. There was a short message in my brother's handwriting.

Dear Bart:
You tried, but it's hopeless. I'd really prefer not living anymore. I hope you understand and I hope this won't keep you from living. Bye.

I read the note several times, then held it in my hand while night slowly leaked into the day.

The next morning I arrived at the office and went straight to my desk. I pulled out a legal pad and started writing.

"A memorial service for Maxwell Sturges of no fixed address was performed today in the offices of Signature Greetings of Portland, Oregon.

"Mr. Sturges died a second time due to family preference. He had been needlessly and thoughtlessly resurrected by the greeting card firm which contracted to keep in touch with his wife after his death. He was less than a year dead.

"Mr. Sturges's chief activity during his brief resurrection was sending his wife annoying cards and letters, and providing a small income for an

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employee at Signature Greetings.

"He is still survived by his wife Angela.

"Cremation took place at Signature."

After I finished I read it over. Still had the touch.

I tore off the page and stuffed it in an envelope, addressed it to Angela, stamped it, and slipped it into my jacket pocket.

Then I pulled out all the material on Maxwell Sturges: his contract, the notes I took at his pre-death interview, the disk where I kept the verses I had sent, the ones I had worked on for future mailings, all of it. I tossed it into a trash can by my desk and lit a match and dropped it into the can.

I waited for the smoke to billow. Some of my colleagues came over and stood beside me. No one said anything. Soon the flames started to consume the paper and plastic. Thick black smoke began to fill the room. I picked up the flowers that Angela Sturges had sent to her husband. The edges of the petals were already brown and dried out. I tossed the roses into the trash can just as the sprinkler system cut in and began to soak us all.

I held a pad over the trash can so that the water wouldn't extinguish the flames.

The smoke reminded me of dreams obscured, of visions blurred.

Yost came out of his office, red-faced and screaming. "Burns! What the hell are you doing? Put out that fire."

Someone ran up with a fire extinguisher and covered the trash can with white powder. It looked like a box of baking soda had exploded.

I would have preferred to let the flames burn even longer, but some things are not in one's control. In the streams of water coming down on us all I saw blank ghost faces staring at me.

I sighed, bent down, and picked up the trash can. I got white powder all over my shirt and pants.

I walked out of the building, got in my car with the trash can and drove to the post office. I spread the ashes representing the second short life of Maxwell Sturges over the lawn near the blue mailboxes marked "IN TOWN," "OUT OF TOWN," and "METERED MAIL ONLY."

Then I dropped the envelope with Max's obit into the out of town mailbox.

I was pretty sure Angela Sturges would appreciate the information.

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Susan Wade last appeared in F&SF *in March of 1994. Since then, she had sold a novel,* Walking Rain, *to Bantam Books, and published several short stories, including one in the third volume of* Snow White, Blood Red.

About "Intruders," Susan writes, "This story started to jell one evening around dusk when I went up my front walk and saw the figure of a man inside my house. The odd thing was that the figure didn't seem menacing. This image of a shadow man stuck with me, and, eventually, the character who seemed to fit with him to make a story was Julia."

Intruders

By Susan Wade

THE MAN WAS IN HER HOUSE again when she came home, standing still and shadowed on the landing at the top of the stairs. Julia Ogilvy glimpsed the tall figure through the window over the stairs as she went up the walk. Her key was in her hand, poised for the lock, but she stopped ten steps away from the porch when she saw him. Just as she had every other time, she stared at the window, watching the unmoving, clearly human shape of him there on her stairs, waiting for him to move, or for the light to change. Waiting for some random happening that would reveal him as real and solid, or as nothing more than an odd pattern of light that collected on her landing.

Dusk was approaching, though not yet arrived. It was spring, and the air outside was warm and moist and tasted green. Julia stood there and let the light fade, her key in her hand, as she watched the tall, thin figure inside her house. The light shifted and changed around him; his figure grew more shadowed. But it was still clearly there, still a man. Julia knew as soon as she dropped her gaze, as soon as she unlocked her front door and dashed up the

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stairs, the thread of his existence would snap. He was never there when she got to the landing.

This was the first time she had seen him in over a month, since before her three-week vacation. Once or twice she had seen him by the sliding glass doors that opened onto the balcony from her bedroom. One time he had been standing downstairs, waiting for her, staring out at her through the window next to the breakfast nook. But almost always he waited for her on the stairs. She wondered about that as she stood on the walk, about his preference for the landing, about his stillness. He never moved at all, not even a shift of his stance or a twitch of his hands as they dangled awkwardly from his long arms. The huge pecan tree in her front yard cast moving shadows over him, patterned like bars by its long thin leaves. But the man never moved. He simply disappeared every time she went inside.

It had grown dark as Julia stood on the walk, occasionally scraping a shriveled pecan catkin off the walk with her shoe; now and then easing her leather briefcase from one hand to the other. But she never took her eyes from his tall figure.

He was gone when she went in, as he always was. Julia slipped off her shoes and padded upstairs to stand on the landing. If he had been there in his accustomed spot, they would have been face to face. She had an instant of longing for that, to be able to reach her left hand to the light switch on the wall and press the rheostat flat with her palm. She wanted to hear the guttural click as the light came on, soft and dim, not strong enough to drive away the shadows. Only enough for her to see his face, to look at the fabric of his long dark coat and the shape of the big hands he kept so loose and motionless at his sides.

To see his face.

She had always lived alone, ever since college. Somehow, her affairs never seemed to progress to living together. All these years of dating, falling in love, and still she'd never found the right man. She had turned forty-six in February, on the sixteenth. Her mother had always called Julia her belated Valentine. But her mother had been dead for almost two years, and Julia had never known her father.

She had first seen the man in her house a week or so after her birthday. It had been frightening at first, when she thought he was a real intruder. It

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took three phone calls to the police — three humiliating trips to her house during which they found no one on the premises and no sign of forced entry — before Julia realized they never would find him. She wondered whether his appearance was related to her birthday. Imagining things so she wouldn't have to think about turning fifty?

But long after birthday twinges subsided into the compelling, well-orchestrated chaos of her career, she would return home to find the man standing in that spot, waiting motionless for — what? It happened most often near dusk. After the third time, she stopped racing to her neighbor Rob's house to call the police. The fourth time he appeared, she had gone straight indoors to try to capture him, to prove — to herself, at least — that he was really there. Not just a strange set of shadows that lived at the top of her stairs.

There was no one inside, no one there at all. She walked back outside and stood on the pavement staring at the window. No shadowy figure showed. He had been there. He *had*. And now he was gone. She gathered up her briefcase and left again, not even pausing to put on lower-heeled shoes. Ordinarily, she preferred not to eat in restaurants. She got too much of that when she traveled on business. But that night she found herself unable to stay in the house after seeing his figure so clearly. Not when she was utterly certain he had been there on the landing. Not when she could now find no trace of him.

She left the house and went to a Bennigan's because it was easy, and ordered Irish whisky on the rocks, along with a salad and boiled shrimp. Then she cracked her briefcase and settled into work. Three too many whiskies later, she shoved the advertising presentations her reps had prepared back into the case. She wasn't able to concentrate on them tonight and she was damned if she would let her standards slide.

The brass rail behind the booth she sat in felt cool when she turned and leaned her cheek against it. The tang of the brass polish was sharp enough to taste. Her booth was in an alcove near the bar. A tall man sat there, drinking a Schlitz and watching baseball on the big-screen T.V. He wore a dark green jacket over a black T-shirt and jeans, with boots, and his big body managed to look loose and easy on the uncomfortable bar stool.

He glanced around, caught her eye, and smiled. Without considering, Julia smiled back. He was tall, a bit lanky, and his jacket was dark. She wondered what he would look like in silhouette.

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He picked up his beer bottle and came over. "You in town on business too?" he asked.

Most times she would have said yes. These things went better if there were no complications, no phone calls next time he was in town and wanting company. But this time she said, "I live here, actually."

He slid into the booth, facing her. "Fooled me with that briefcase."

She smiled. "Paperwork."

"I'd never have expected a classy looking lady like yourself to use bad words like that." He winked. "I save mine and do it on the plane going home."

"Yes, I've noticed the men who work for me like to party during week, and worry about the paperwork later." She tilted her head back and lowered her eyes, feeling tension ease along her shoulderblades. "They call me a ball-buster because I review everything before and after it's presented to the client." She smiled slowly. "They may even be right. But I get results."

He picked up the last shrimp left on her plate and popped it in his mouth. His teeth were large and a little dingy. A heavy coffee-drinker, she thought idly. He didn't smell like a smoker.

"I'll bet you do," he said, and winked again. He added some remark about the weather that Julia responded to automatically, the same kind of small talk she always made with her clients. The liquor she had drunk had left her body warm and softened, and she realized she was saying more than she usually would.

"Can I drag you away from your work long enough to have a drink with me?" he asked.

She slapped a hand on the briefcase. "I've given up on it. Why don't we go to my place for that drink?"

His eyebrows went up a bit. "Why, surely. I'd be much obliged."

"You'll have to settle for whisky," she said. "I don't keep beer in the house."

He smiled. "I can't turn that down. My daddy told me a long time ago, there's two things you never say no to. A free drink and a good-looking woman."

He looked around the living room while she went to the antique pine cupboard in the dining room to pour the drinks.

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"These are some nice pictures," he said, squinting at two of the enlarged photographs that hung over the sofa. "Real nice. I like nature pictures."

"Thank you," she said as she handed him his drink. "I enjoyed taking them."

He turned and looked at her. "You took these?"

"Yes. I like photography. One of my little hobbies. I have a small darkroom down in the basement."

He studied one of the photographs, a picture she had taken of a small pond near Corsicana, limpid and green under a brilliant sky, gray moss dripping from the branches of the oaks along the bank. "Looks like you're awful damn good to be calling it a hobby." He took a long drink of whisky.

"Thanks," she said and drank off her own. "I like to capture things on film. It makes them hold still long enough for me to understand them."

The need to take him upstairs was urgent. Why? Not for the sex. That wasn't going to be any different than it ever was. But she wanted the polite preliminaries over with. She went to the rheostat that controlled the living room chandelier and lowered the setting until shadows draped the vaulted ceiling. "Let's go on up. You go ahead, I'll just top off our drinks."

He cleared his throat. "Why, sure."

She slopped liquor on the cupboard and didn't stop to wipe it up. She was right behind him when he got to the landing. The whisky burned in her stomach. "Wait," she whispered.

He paused, just where she wanted him to, and her heart pulsed against her ribs; for a second he looked—his coat was long and dark, his figure tall and angular — he looked — as he turned, she blinked hard to hold back tears, not sure why.

The illusion snapped when he faced her. He was just a salesman she had picked up in a bar. Just a tall man in his late forties who happened to be wearing a dark coat.

Julia sagged against the bannister. This is all wrong, she thought, this is not how it's supposed to be.

"You feeling shy all of a sudden?" he asked. He put his hand on her breast and squeezed it, hard.

And suddenly her hands were shaking too much to hold the whisky glasses, and the heavy crystal went thudding down onto the carpeted stairs, and rolled and thudded again on the step below, and again; one glass after the other in a rolling thunder of sound like someone beating on a door in great

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slow deliberate gongs. The sound twisted itself through her head in unceasing cycles, booming, "Not you, not you, not you, not you..." And the pain inside her exploded, was blown everywhere, all around her, hammering at her in time with the high screaming voice that sobbed, "No, not you, not you, no, no — " and she struck back, pounding her hands on the door she had to get through but *could not open* —

— until she was knocked sideways against the wall, and all the breath went out of her, and her head ricocheted so hard she tasted blood. She clenched her fists, and they hurt, a sharp pain in her knuckles.

"God damn it, are you crazy?" he shouted at her. "If you changed your mind, just say so, you stupid bitch!" He shoved her against the wall again.

Julia blinked against the crowding shadows and saw him, one hand blotting blood from his mouth and chin with a handkerchief, saw him tall at the top of her stairs, scowling, face shadowed in the gathering dimness, looking for an instant almost as she had needed him to look; almost.

Then he was gone, and the huge, shaking sound of the door slamming was what she took with her into unconsciousness.

THE NEXT morning was a Thursday. It was difficult for her to move, but she got out of bed when the alarm went off at 5:30. She had some codeine tablets she had never taken, left from when she had broken her wrist at Christmas three years before. She took two of the pills, showered, and put on her favorite black suit. The worst bruise started below her collarbone, just above her heart, and spread upward toward her throat. She covered the part that showed above her collar with make-up, but there was nothing she could do about her scraped knuckles.

For lunch, she had two more codeine tablets, then went out and used her hour to buy a pair of binoculars.

After she got back, she found that the managing partner of the ad agency had had his secretary schedule a meeting with her for 4:20 on Friday. Richard Billings always scheduled unpleasant meetings for late afternoon. One of his much-mentioned management techniques: Always give employees time to cool down after getting bad news.

The next afternoon, Julia walked into his suite of offices at 4:19. She carried her leather portfolio in case she needed to take notes. Richard's

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assistant had her mouth cocked open to a precise angle and was applying burgundy lipstick with a small brush. The lipstick exactly matched the flawless polish on her inch-long fingernails. She uncocked her mouth when she saw Julia. "He said for you to go right in, Ms. Ogilvy."

"Thank you, Barbara." Julia gave Richard's door an abbreviated knock and opened it.

He was looking out the big window behind his desk while he talked on the phone, his chair turned away from the door. It gave her a good view of the patch of pink scalp that showed through the dark hair at his crown. "Great, great, Bob. Let's do that soon. Sure. So long." Richard spun his chair around and hung up the phone in one practiced movement. "Julia, right on time, as always. Let's sit over here." He moved to the work table against the wall and gestured her to a seat.

Julia took a tighter grip on her portfolio. She didn't need this crap, today of all days. Her body ached all over. "Barbara didn't tell Lannie what you wanted to see me about."

"I didn't discuss it with her," Richard said. His face assumed its sincerest good-manager look.

Julia studied him. He had been in love with her once, back when she was a struggling account rep. In the past fifteen years his features had grown softer: His chin and cheekbones had plumped up, even though his face wasn't round. She knew he worked at keeping a lean figure; the partners were fond of reminding people that this was a youth industry. His fair skin, always tanned and smooth in her memory, looked thin and mottled. It was odd to remember now the way he had always been after her to make a commitment; he had even cried once when he begged her to marry him and she had said no. He had left his wife anyway, but it wasn't enough to change Julia's mind. By then, she had known that men always faded when she needed them most. Eventually he and Carrie had reconciled.

Julia sighed and pulled out the chair he had indicated. "Just give it to me straight, Rich. Is it the Carruthers account?"

His expression became even more concerned and sincere. "Why, no, Julia. Nothing like that. This really isn't about business, except in a peripheral sense. I just wanted to speak to you as a friend."

Her stomach muscles tightened, but she kept her face still. "Why, thank you, Rich."

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He cleared his throat. "We — the partners and I — wanted to suggest you take a vacation, now, before the summer hits. When it starts getting hot, everyone's temper frays. And, frankly, Julia, yours has been a bit short lately. You've got a lot of vacation time you've carried over, and now would be a good time, logistically speaking, for you to use some of it."

"Logistically speaking? Rich, for Christ's sake, the Carruthers account is worth ten million over the next eighteen months. The negotiations are at crisis point, and Carruthers likes dealing with me."

"Yes, yes, of course he does. There's no question that you have a way with the clients, Julia."

His unspoken implication hit her like a shock wave, about ten seconds after he stopped talking. *You're a raging bitch with your own staff, though.*

Julia swallowed. "When did you have in mind, Rich? The Carruthers thing really is hot right now."

He beamed at her. "That's the spirit! We just want you at the top of your form for the next big account. You told me last week you thought the Carruthers deal would be settled by the end of the month."

She nodded, feeling like an obedient child. Reluctantly obedient. But she was slated for partnership by the end of the year, nearly two years ahead of schedule. Time to play nice. "By the twenty-seventh, I think."

"Fine, fine. You've got plenty of vacation, how about taking three weeks now, and — "

His gaze slid to her collarbone. She had used make-up on the bruises again today, but they were too dark to be completely hidden.

" — and maybe take some more time in the fall, we'll see how things are going, okay? You know, Carrie and I went to New Mexico last spring, to the mountains. Lovely, cool, all those trees. Why don't you think about it?"

"The mountains would be delightful this time of year," Julia agreed evenly, as she rejected the idea. She spent too much time in airports and hotels as it was. "Three weeks, starting the first of the month?"

"Sounds like a great idea!" His tone was congratulatory, as if she had come up with a brilliant proposal.

"Great," she echoed and stood up. "Then, if there's nothing else you needed to discuss — "

"Not a thing, not a thing," he assured her, standing also. He reached over and squeezed her shoulder; she managed not to flinch, although it hurt. "You

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really relax and enjoy that trip, you hear? No calling in to see how things are going. Don't even think about this place."

"I won't," she said. It was true; she had more important things to think about. She would let Richard pat her on the head if he insisted, but she was damned if she would let him pack her off to summer camp. She would stay right here in town and relax.

Before her vacation started, she took to timing her arrival home for dusk. She would park farther up along the street, where she could sight the binoculars past the curve of her walkway to the window over the stairs. If she waited until the light was just right, she thought she would be more likely to see him. It was a way to show him that she was waiting too, waiting for the same thing he waited for. They each kept a vigil for something, she without knowing what it was.

But she hadn't seen the shadow man since the night she brought the stranger home from the bar. Once she was on vacation, she began leaving the house every afternoon and returning just before sunset, but it was no good. It was as if the focus of her attention created too harsh a condition for him to come. Or maybe it was that she was in the house too much now, her presence there most of the day dispelling that other, more shadowy presence.

She wanted to know who he was. By the second Friday of her vacation, a dusky day made gray with rain, the longing to understand her visitation was unassuageable. She paced restlessly through the rain-prisoned house and could not soothe herself. No drink, no twenty drinks, no hobby, no affair could solace this.

Julia pulled on old sweats and mushy sneakers and fled into the rain. She walked without caring where she went. The air was slick and soggy in her nostrils, and her wet clothes could not distract her from the twisting need, the emptiness in her middle where something essential had been amputated years ago.

She walked. The streets were grimy with rain and occluded light. Julia passed houses, office buildings, and cars on the streets; but all she saw was their desolate reflection on the glistening charcoal-colored cement.

The sky bulked bigger and darker, then roiled and spat huge angry drops at her, stinging splats that struck her face like insults before they solidified into a hammering downpour. She covered her head with her arms and ducked into a doorway of arched pale bricks. The rain swept in and pounded at her.

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She dragged at the dark wooden inner door and went through. It was only after she was inside that Julia recognized the vestry of a church. She peered into the gloomy chapel and saw the red-flickered glimmer of prayer candles off to one side.

Her feet moved her forward until she stood beneath the crucifix above the altar. Rain dripped from her hair and ran down her face into her eyes. She blinked it away to look. On Christ's face was a look of such sparkling agony, of such joyous fulfillment, that, in that instant, she was certain He understood her need, understood what she herself did not.

So she sank to her knees before Him and clasped her hands together as her mother had once taught her. Not in a church, only at bedside, for saying little-girl prayers before sleep. But protocol was protocol. What she half-recognized in the Christ's face — surely He would see past the words to her emptiness and illuminate it.

Her palms were cold, pressed one against the other; and for a moment, she was that little girl: scraped knees pressed into a fluffy pink throw rug over wooden floors, the golden light of summer dusk just beginning to fade as she knelt before her narrow bed.

"I don't want to go to sleep, Mama. I want a story."

"No stories, Julia. It's bedtime. Be a sweet little girl and say your prayers so God will look after you."

"I want a story! Gina's daddy always reads her a bedtime story. Goldilocks. I want to hear Goldilocks. About the Mama bear and the Papa bear and the — "

"I told you, no story! Say your prayers."

"Gina's daddy doesn't make her say stupid old prayers."

"God won't look after Gina if she doesn't say her prayers. Do as you're told, Julia."

The chapel air was soft and dark and moist around her, the only sounds the crackle of hot candle wax and rain from her sweatsuit dripping on the floor. "Please," she said. No one answered. There was still no one who would explain things to her, only a statue.

She bowed her head. "Now I lay me down to sleep..." And then she had no more words, nothing with which to plead for the Christ's secret knowledge, no supplication by which her salvation might be drawn from His plaster face. She knew no prayer for respite from what dwelt inside her.

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The sobs took her like the storm, the thunder of them quaking through her flesh in jagged sounds that scored her throat. She was crying, shrieking words; she didn't know what words. The thunder of her storm was loud around her —

— then suddenly she knew the words that tore her throat as she shouted them over and over: "Can you feel it in me? Can you *feel* it?" And raggedly, unspoken underneath, begged, Can you tell me what it is? Can you show me what I feel?

Beneath the thundering darkness of her screams, she felt perilously close to the salvation she had envisioned, deathly near either being safely captured, or safely falling. She could fall forever.

The lights went on in the nave, casting a spear of light into the womb of the chapel. Then someone caught her by the shoulders, and her storm was lost.

"Oh dear," he said in a deep, soft voice. "Let me help you sit down. You're quite soaked."

She let him raise her, allowed him to lead her to the first pew. Whatever answers she might have found here were gone, and inside her the loss wailed. But she could not give voice to it; physical voice was inadequate.

The priest brought a blanket and wrapped her in the shrunken scruffy wool. It smelled of camphor. She slid her lips along the tattered satin binding and closed her eyes.

His hands trembled as he tucked the blanket closer around her; he was old, older than this church, older than the plaster Jesus. He made small nervous clicks at the back of his throat that reminded her of the noise her car made as the engine cooled.

"Do you have no place to stay?" he asked.

Julia let her head sag against the back of the pew and swallowed. "It's not that," she whispered. Her throat felt as if it were bleeding inside.

He went away again, and she turned sideways on the pew, putting her back to the light. She laid her cheek against the polished wood and was still.

The crucifix was silhouetted by the light from the nave, its plaster face in darkness now. She could not see what was in His face, could not see whether He had felt what this was inside her. There would be no guidance given now.

The priest came back carrying a thick white mug with a spoon stuck in

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it. The spoon handle clattered against the side of the mug as he offered it to her. She smelled tea. He guided her hands around the cup, then tore open three small packets and poured a white crystal stream into the mug. She could feel the tremor of his hand as he stirred the tea.

He removed the spoon. A hot drop soaked through her wet pants to burn her thigh, like a solitary tear.

"Drink," he said.

The tea seared her throat and was thickly sweet, but spilled false warmth into her. So she drank it all, gulping at its heat and ordinariness. He took the cup away when she was done.

Wood creaked as he sat down on the pew next to her.

"What can I do to help you?"

She was facing away from him. That and the fact that her own voice was a stranger's rasp made it easier. It was like listening to two strangers talk in the dark. "I don't know. I don't know what's wrong with me. This crazy thing's been happening to me — if I told you, you wouldn't believe me — I don't understand it. But instead of just scaring me, it's made me feel — " she broke off.

He waited without moving or speaking.

"I'm not sure what's going on with me. I have this feeling there's a part of me cut out.... I feel," and suddenly her throat clenched with the simple truth of it, "sad."

She cried quietly for a moment. He didn't interrupt.

When the sound of her sobs softened, he said, "Tell me this crazy thing that's been happening to you."

"You won't believe me. Nobody does."

"Who doesn't believe you?"

"The police. The neighbors. None of them."

He shifted in the dark, and the pew creaked again. "Priests are a strange breed. We base our entire lives on the faith — the belief, if you will — that there is more to existence than just that which can be seen or touched." He said nothing more, only waited.

Silently. In darkness.

It was that, she realized, the connection the priest shared with the shadow man, that let her speak of him. So she told the priest of the figure that waited in her house on the landing of her stairway. Of how she had been afraid at first, of attempting later to confront her fear.... She paused then.

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"And now?" he asked.

She moved restlessly on the pew, pulling at the scratchy blanket. "Now I don't know. I'm confused. I feel strange and sick. No, I feel — "

She hesitated, not sure how to put words to the strangeness inside her.

"You feel...?"

"It's more like...like I've been wounded."

"Wounded? In what way?"

"Wounded — to death." She paused again, groping for comprehension, not at all sure where the words were coming from. "For a long, long time. And I've only just now realized it. Like being shot and not feeling the pain until you see the blood. And now it — hurts." Her voice ended on a squeak as her throat tightened again.

"So seeing this shadow man has made you realize your...injury?"

She nodded.

"Who is he?"

"If I knew, everything would be all right. If I could see his face, I know I would understand all this. But I can't. He won't wait for me."

"Whom does he represent to you then?"

She shrugged and clutched the blanket close as it started to slip.

"A brother?" he suggested gently.

She shook her head. "I'm an only child."

"Lover? Ex-husband?"

"No, I've never been married. No," she hesitated a second, "no serious affairs."

"You're an attractive woman." His inflection made it a question.

"Yes. Attractive. Attractive and *successful*."

After a moment, he said, "I see your point...I suppose. Your father, then?"

Julia hunched her knees up to her chest and wrapped the meager blanket around her toes. "I never knew my father," she said in her stranger's voice.

"Oh?"

The darkness was kind around her, a secure tomb of secrecy and protection and silence. "He died in Korea before I was born. At least that's what my mother always told people."

"You don't believe your mother told the truth?"

"She had a photograph of a nice-looking man in uniform. She kept it on her nightstand. It was there until the day she died."

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He said nothing.

"The man in the picture had blonde hair, like my mother's. Blonde hair and gray eyes, just like she did. They looked a lot alike."

"And?" the priest said after a moment.

She shrugged again and leaned her forehead on her knees. "And I have dark hair, almost black. Brown eyes."

"So you think your mother was unfaithful — "

"Or that she was never married at all."

"And the picture...?"

"I've thought — he might have been her brother," Julia said. "But I don't *know*! That's the point of everything in my whole life, can't you see? I can think about who he was, what he was like, but I'll never really know!"

He was silent then.

She turned eventually to look at him. He was gazing abstractedly at the shadowed face of the Christ. "Excuse me," she whispered. "I didn't mean to raise my voice."

It took him an instant to respond. Watching his face, she had the feeling he had been drawn back from a far place.

"It's quite all right, my dear. An emotional subject, naturally." He straightened his back and folded his hands in his lap. "There's always exorcism, you know."

"What?" She had been thinking, for some reason, of the silver filigree frame on her mother's nightstand, the paled photograph with its secrets hidden behind the young-man smile. Both had gone with her mother to the grave.

"For your shadowy houseguest, my dear. An exorcism." When she didn't respond, he smiled briefly. "Exorcism is not limited to the supernatural, my dear. It can also dispel demons of a more personal nature."

What he meant penetrated only slowly. When she realized his intention, she stumbled to her feet. They tangled in the blanket, so she had to grasp the pew to keep her balance. Dispel him? She had thought this one was like the shadow man, silent, waiting. Not like the police and the others —

"No," she whispered. Then louder, "No. I thought you understood — he's not trying to take something from me. He's come to *restore* it — "

He stood. "My dear — "

"No! No — I won't let you — I don't *want* him to go away!"

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He reached out a gnarled hand to her, but she struck it away and dragged her feet free of the blanket. "No," she said again, and the word echoed loud in the darkness, echoed in her stranger's voice, and then she was running down the aisle, running from the sound of the priest calling after her.

She ran without direction until she couldn't run any more. Then she walked just as aimlessly. At some point, familiar streets presented themselves, and she wandered home.

The house was black and cavernous. It pleased her to find it so. She didn't turn on any lights, just felt her way upstairs and struggled out of her clammy sweat suit. Then she was falling into the deeper darkness of her dreams.

The man on the landing spoke to her in her dreams that night, calling to her in a resonant voice that held a touch of raspiness. He called to her and explained important things to her, things she needed desperately to know. Things she *must* understand.

But when she woke, twisting against sheets damp with her own sweat, she could not remember what he had said.

IN SOME WAYS, it was easier for her, after the dream. Even though she did not see him again immediately, it was easier to believe he had not forsaken her.

The rest of her vacation passed; for the first time, Julia was not eager to return to the office.

Putting on her favorite suit, the black one with the wide polished gold buttons, was like donning a costume. Her briefcase felt strange in her hand. She locked the front door behind her and paused at the curve in the walkway to glance up at the window over the landing.

The frenetic energy of the office was muted for her now; it happened through a haze, as if she were watching a play through a scrim. Several of her reps commented on how relaxed she seemed, and Julia smiled and said the mountains had been wonderfully calming.

She stayed in her office until nearly sunset, filing her nails.

He was there when she got home. She stood at the curve of the sidewalk and stared up at him, straining to see his face in the shadows. Her binoculars were in her bedroom; she had forgotten to put them back in her briefcase after her vacation. She stood there watching him until it had grown full dark, scraping an occasional pecan catkin off the sidewalk with her shoe, easing the

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briefcase from one hand to the other. But she never took her eyes from his tall figure.

He was gone when she went in. Again, he had not waited for her, not long enough. She climbed the stairs and stood on the landing. She cupped her hand over the rheostat control, thought of how it would be to press it, to add a hint of light to the shadows here. Just enough for her to see his face.

If only he had waited for her.

She called the office the next morning and told them she had a migraine. No one questioned her; she never called in sick. At ten o'clock, she took her camera case and drove to the best camera shop in town.

It was early on a Tuesday morning, so she had all of the manager's attention. He looked at her a little oddly when she described the shot to him: A heavily shadowed figure photographed through a window while external light levels were higher than those indoors.

"You really need to increase the interior light level somehow," he said. "Or at least balance it. Otherwise, you'll never get any resolution of the image."

"Black and white film," she said. "That should help."

He looked doubtful. "Yeah, some. But not enough. Light the interior, that's all I can suggest."

"That's not possible," she said.

He shrugged and suggested she try calling the camera manufacturer's help hotline. It seemed to cheer him up when she bought the most powerful telephoto lens they carried.

The man wasn't there that night. Julia smiled to herself as she thought about it, wondering if he were camera-shy. But she felt certain now that he would appear again, on his own schedule, something she could not force.

It took nearly two weeks before she saw him again. The camera was with her all the time now, its case slung over her shoulder like a purse. She dumped her briefcase in the grass, and removed the lens cap with hands that quivered. She slowed down then, and made the settings deliberately, keeping track of each exposure. Her timing had been good. She had almost three quarters of an hour of half-light, long enough to shoot three rolls of film.

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When the light was gone, she hurried inside and changed clothes. The darkroom was ready. Waiting for the film to process in its bath was hard. She found herself fiddling with it too much and forced herself to stop. When it was done, she prepared a contact sheet and printed each of the rolls in turn, without looking at any of the results. She washed the printed sheets and hung them up. Her hands were shaking again.

As soon as the contact sheets were dry, she shut off the red light in the darkroom and took them upstairs to the dining room. The light was good; she could examine the exposures better there.

The first roll was a complete loss; the window was nothing but a black oblong. That wasn't unexpected. Too much light outside.

The second roll began to show some interior blots of dark and light, but the shapes were grainy and indistinct.

It was on the third roll that she found it; the light levels must have hit a perfect balance for that one shot. She went to her study and got the magnifying glass she sometimes used for checking ad paste-ups. Looking through it, she saw that the image was clearer than she had hoped: the shadowed figure was perfectly defined. The contact print was too small to offer much detail, but she was closer to really seeing him than she had ever been.

She marked the negative she wanted and went back down to the darkroom to enlarge it. She decided on an 8 X 10 print as the best balance between clarity and size. On her fourth print, she got the cleanest definition she could hope for: the distinct figure of a tall man in a long coat, arms dangling at his sides as he stood in shadow.

His face was not visible.

She drifted for several days, like a water plant, torn free of its roots, that floats downstream. And, like such a plant, she fetched up on an unfamiliar shore. Not recognizing the source of her impulse, she took the photograph to the frame shop she used for her prints.

The woman who owned the shop said, "Working in black and white now? This is an interesting study. Who was your model?"

Julia turned away from the intrusive question and pretended an interest in an Erté print displayed on the rear wall. She would not share him.

"Do you have an idea about what matting and frame type you want on

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this?" the woman asked after a moment. "Something simple, I think, to keep from distracting from the image. It's quite arresting."

Julia turned back. "Yes, it is, isn't it? I think a plain three-quarter round black frame, with a gray matte about three inches wide." That was all she had planned, but she hesitated as she glanced over the matte samples. A deep scarlet sample caught her eye. "And that dark red. A narrow inner angled matte that shows a line of red."

The owner raised her eyebrows. "Yes. That should be quite effective." She wrote up a sales ticket, her handwriting clear and black on the white form. "You always get regular glass, I remember. That'll be—" She used her calculator briefly. "Forty-nine seventy-two. Will that be cash or charge?"

Julia wrote the woman a check and took her receipt. "When can you have it ready?"

The woman looked over her shoulder at a wall calendar. "You're such a good customer, we can have it for you day after tomorrow. Any time after noon."

Julia picked up the framed print on her way home from work on Friday. It was ready for her, already wrapped and taped in brown paper. She didn't open it; she wanted to be alone when she looked at it.

He wasn't there when she got home. She waited on the walk for almost fifteen minutes, but he didn't appear. Would he ever come again? Could he, now that she had trapped him on film?

She went indoors and changed into her old sweat suit. Her hammer was in the utility room off the kitchen, along with an acrylic box of assorted nails. In a drawer, she found the lightweight nylon cord she used to espalier tree limbs. The label assured her the cord was rated to two thousand pounds.

She carried the hammer, nails, and cord upstairs to the landing, then came back down for the print. Carrying it like an infant, against her chest, she climbed back up the stairs, and sat on the top one to undo the brown paper. It was slick under her fingers, but tore smoothly once she slid a fingernail under the seam where the tape ended.

The brown cocoon spiraled open with a rasping sound, and she lifted the frame free. The gray matte with the line of red along its inner edge was stark, surrendering to the image. He was there, right there with her, yet still shrouded from her in his darkness.

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That was the moment when she realized she would never see his face clearly. He was the shadow man; shadow was his element. He might wait for her, she might see his silhouette, but he would never come forth from darkness for her.

Julia positioned the print carefully on the wall opposite the window, directly behind the spot where he preferred to stand. She drove the nail easily, straight the first time, and hung the photograph.

The image was strong, burned into the film by the pattern of light and shadow that was his essence. Hanging there it looked — correct. The shadows surrounding him blended with the shadows on the landing, lapping around her in dark welcome.

She stooped to pick up the nylon line, and it ran smoothly through her fingers, wound itself around her hand like a friendly snake. The iron balustrade was firmly fixed, rooted deep in the wood of the stairs. It was strong, and the line would hold.

The label had promised her.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

YourMoney ™

Secretary of the Treasury
Washington, DC

DEAR FRIEND of the Dollar:

If you're anything like me, you have a soft spot in your heart for cash. The convenience, the tangibility, the glorious *tradition* of this wonderful medium of exchange.

Dad handing you your allowance money. Taping the first dollar your very own business ever earned to the wall above the cash-register. Grandma tucking a set of Lincolns into her card to you at Christmas.

And there's no exaggerating the fuss-free, feel-good, sheer *spendability* of plain old folding money. Even in today's up-to-the-minute world of commerce and high finance, you won't find anyone turning up their nose at a bag or two of neatly banded tender.

These are important qualities that credit cards, debit cards or electronic funds transfers — of any magnetic stripe — just can't deliver. Sure, like all of us, I rely on plastic for transactions I don't really *care* about. Renting a car. Paying taxes. Buying insurance. But I just don't feel right without some of the old "cabbage" bulking out my wallet.

Buying your child an ice-cream cone from a smiling Good Humor™ vendor. Impulsively purchasing a dozen TeleFlora™ roses for your spouse. Tipping your bellhop at one of the fine Disney™ resorts. Try doing that with plastic, and you'll quickly see just how much satisfaction you're missing. Call me nostalgic or sentimental, but I'll bet you feel exactly as I do. And, believe me, we're not alone.

Still, let me be the first to admit that America's cash has lately fallen a little behind the times, style-wise. Sexy, it's not! Although honored and esteemed worldwide, its image isn't what it once was. The Mighty Dollar looks just a wee bit drab these days. Memories of Hoover, Pearl Harbor, Eisenhower and all that. After all,

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there have been no major design changes in our money for decades! It's as if Detroit were still producing Packards and Edsels. They might get us where we want to go, but it wouldn't be very stylish or up-to-date, or even much *fun*.

Well, YourGovernment™ has *listened* to your complaints and suggestions regarding United States currency. And we've taken *action*. Assembling some of the nation's finest minds from the fields of advertising, industrial design, law enforcement and fashion, the Treasury Department has completely reworked the whole concept of how the nation's money should function, and what it should deliver to the consumer. We feel it's the most exciting idea since the invention of wampum.

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It's yours to design!

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Everything else that really

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matters to you — from your clothes to your car, your home to your favorite recreations, your checks to your credit cards, your choice of beer or lipstick — reflects your individual style. Up till now, only your money has failed to keep in step with your desire for personal expression.

But now, there's YourMoney™!

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

Here's how YourMoney™ begins.

Start to think about what images you'd like YourMoney™ to have on it. Your pets, your loved ones, your diplomas. Perhaps a statement of principle, a motto, a creed. The ancestral homestead, the summer cottage, the weekend yacht. Reproduce (within copyright limitations) a favorite work of art. Go abstract! Anything! After all, it's YourMoney™.

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Last year, our July issue focused on baseball and softball. About two months after that issue went to bed, "New Horizons in Stickball" appeared on my desk. Always a completist, I decided to do another mini summer sports issue this July.

"New Horizons in Stickball" is Robert J. Levy's second science fiction sale. Amazing Stories *published his first. He has published four poetry collections, and his short fiction has appeared in* Paris Review, Kenyon Review, *and many others. He has won poetry awards, and has received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. He works as managing editor of United Feature Syndicate, and lives in New York City with his wife and young son.*

New Horizons in Stickball

By Robert J. Levy

AT THE START OF THE summer of 1965, when I was twelve years old, I believed my life was permanently circumscribed by the small-minded, imagination-parched streets I moved through. Then Huge arrived to play in the Burton Street Games, teaching us possibilities in the sport of stickball no one had suspected. By the end of that same summer I had participated in the ultimate stickball game, hit the fly ball to end all fly balls, and discovered that even the suburbs can be touched, however briefly, by marvels.

It was just Mitch and me the day it all began. The afternoon had been hot and close, but toward evening the humidity broke and the breeze grew merciful, particularly at the highest point of Burton Street where we had been playing fungo with a spaldeen and an old broomhandle doctored with black electrician's tape. We'd already worked out the cars-equals-hits thing: the green Buick was a single; further down, a white Cadillac was a double; beyond that we selected a Mustang to be a triple; at the very end of the street, an old Woody Wagon was a homer.

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At one point Mitch smacked an erring line drive that disappeared into the backyard thicket of a distant home. We climbed the fence, but couldn't find the ball, so we called it quits for the day. Later, we sat atop a rusted, wheelless Chevy in an overgrown lot behind the train tracks of the Long Island Railroad, reclining against its fractured windshield, trying not to gag as we smoked a couple of Swisher Sweets Mitch had copped from his dad.

School was out. September was miles away. It ought to have been a perfect spot at a perfect time, overlooking as it did the crisscross-shadowed Little League fields and, beyond that, the seemingly endless grid of suburban avenues and boulevards fanning out like a spiderweb on all sides. However, my folks had recently split up. My dad removed himself from the familial picture to hole up with his new girlfriend in Hempstead (good riddance to him, to his violent tempers, and to being smacked for no reason). My mom sat home giving herself ulcers, pawing through religious pamphlets for life's answers, and plotting revenge.

Me, I was depressed as hell. I spent my days reading grim French fiction I didn't really comprehend ("Mother died yesterday. Maybe it was the day before ...") and smoking joints on the sly. I hated the neighborhood, the pettiness of it, the closeted, cloistered, blinkered, racist, philistine, ghettoized narrowness of Queens and environs. Of course, at the time, I would have simply said the place sucked big-time. The fact was, I wanted something more than my friends wanted, something great and grand. But I had no name for what that might be and no understanding of how to achieve my goal. All I knew was that the suburbs did not breed the sort of magic I sought.

So there we were, Mitch and I, watching silently as the normally squalid streets of Queens were momentarily transformed into the gleaming kingdom of my wildest fantasies by the impossible violet light of the waning sun.

"Will you look at that, Doug?" Mitch said, staring at the sunset.

"What?" I said, acting dumb. I watched Mitch struggle for words, words he did not have. Mitch was not a verbal sort.

"It's...so, like, purple. You know?"

"Sure, Mitch. I sure do."

"Kinda...beautiful." There were tears in Mitch's eyes, which he wiped away furiously. "You tell anybody about this and I break your face."

"Hey man," I said holding up my hands in mock boxing defense, "I'm cool." I'd had a minor revelation: Even inexpressive guys like Mitch can yearn

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for something beyond the shabby streets of Rego Park.

Abruptly, it was night. We looked up at the sky, hearing the distant wash of expressway traffic mingle with the electric chirping of crickets in the weed-strewn areas around the train tracks.

Then we saw something.

It was not, by any means, a traditional heavenly manifestation. No shafts of celestial light coursed down from the firmament. No angelic choirs sang. What Mitch and I witnessed was something both infinitely more mundane and vastly more peculiar.

At the extreme opposite end of Burton Street, a door seemed to open in the sky — just for an instant — and then it closed. It was as though a panel of darkness of slightly different hue than the surrounding darkness unlocked and shut. But in that second we saw something tumble toward a vacant lot about two blocks away. In no time we were off and running.

We arrived at the tract in question and climbed the metal lattice fence. We thrashed around in the weeds for awhile, kicking stones, bottles and cans, making a ruckus, but we didn't see a thing. Still, I felt sure it was the right place.

"This bites it," said Mitch finally, ever expressive. "I gotta go home or my mom'll have a shit fit."

"Yeah, me too."

But as we climbed back up the fence, I happened to look over my shoulder. There, deep within a scraggly bush, I could have sworn I saw two eyes, like luminous yellow dots, staring back at me. I hesitated for moment, and they winked out. But, of course, I was a kid, and it was probably all in my imagination.

When I got home, my mom was in front of the TV, biting her nails furiously, not really watching whatever was on the tube, hardly noticing me enough to say goodnight. Her jaw was grim and clenched, and her eyes were miles away, obviously still visualizing new ways of dismembering my father.

The following day, around four, Mitch and I and about a half-dozen other guys met, as we always did, on Burton Street. Mitch had a couple of spaldeens and a stickball bat. Most of us played bare-handed, though a few wimps with tender palms and fat piggy banks sported gloves.

The group of kids varied from day to day. There were some regulars, like

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me and Mitch and Stu, and every now and again a new kid would show up from lord knows where and ask to be chosen in. That day was no different — the usual mix.

We were choosing up sides. Somehow, over time, Mitch and I had become the leaders of the Burton Street Games. As we were also probably the best players, and pretty evenly matched, we had agreed it was only fair that we head opposing teams. One or two newcomers got chosen toward the end, being unknown raw material. Then, as we made our final selections, we looked up to see someone approaching from further down the street, from the direction of the vacant lot Mitch and I had rummaged through the night before.

The closer he got, the weirder he looked, until, by the time he stood before us, everyone was thinking this was the strangest-looking kid they'd ever seen. Everything about him was just slightly off, but only very slightly — his clothes, normal enough except they were of no style with which we were familiar; his height, tall and gangly, but with arms and legs peculiarly proportioned; his color, which was ever so faintly bluish because his skin was eerily pale and he seemed to have an overabundance of fine veins running just underneath the surface; and his manner of speaking, which was not in words but in highly expressive, breathy exhalations. All that and the constant look of confusion and loneliness on his face marked him as an odd one, probably a kid who recently moved to the neighborhood from out of town.

"Hey schmuckface, you wanna play?" Stu said, always friendly to newcomers.

The weird kid made some kind of herky-jerky motion with his head, which, strangely, we all understood to mean yes. So we chose him in.

"What's your name, kid?" I said.

He just stared back at me, but every once in a while he'd let out a whoosh of air, and it made a sound like *wheeewgh* or *hyuuugh*, so for lack of a better name, and because he *was* such a tall son of a gun, I ended up calling him Huge. The name caught on.

I took pity on the geek, so I chose him for my squad, but I had my doubts. First off, I had the idea that he might be stupid, maybe not quite right in the head. Then, as I started putting people in positions, he looked completely befuddled, and I got this sneaking suspicion.

"Hey, Huge, you ever play this game before?" I asked.

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Huge made his *hyuuu* sound and gyrated his head in a peculiar fashion that I understood to mean no. I sighed and began explaining.

"Okay, so this stick is the bat. This ball...is the ball. You stand here and you bounce it in front of you. When it comes down you swing at it. If you hit it, you run to the base. Simple, right? Okay. The fielders are going to be stationed at intervals all down this street. The Lincoln Continental there, the gray one, is a single. The Corvette further down's a double. The Green Beetle's a triple, and that red convertible Plymouth all the way yonder is a home run. Comprende, amigo?"

I stopped to look at Huge, to see if there was any sign of understanding on his face, but he just looked preoccupied.

"Look, in a nutshell the farther away you hit the ball, the better. Got it? The farther away you go, the closer you get to winning the game."

I don't know what it was — if it was something I said or it had nothing at all to do with my lecture, if he understood me or sudden intuition just bore in upon him — but his face lit up, and he exhaled a particularly loud and resonant *whyuuuuuugh*. My team applauded and cheered. Huge looked genuinely pleased with us and with himself.

Our side took the field first. About fifteen minutes later, after everyone on Mitch's team had driven in several runs — aided in their efforts by Huge's bemused way of watching perfectly catchable balls bounce directly in front of him — it was our turn to bat.

Things were going okay for us. We cracked a few hits, had ourselves a couple of RBIs. Then it was Huge's turn to bat. He'd been watching us, so I figured he'd have the hang of it. He stood there staring off far down the street, and back at us. Then he began.

Instead of bouncing the ball, he simply held it up high above his head, somewhat in front of him. I was about to tell him he was doing it all wrong, but I never had the chance because he let the ball drop and, before it ever hit the ground, spun the bat around single-handed, banging a sizzling single right past the front fender of the Lincoln. We roared our approval from the curb as he trotted awkwardly to first base.

Mitch looked in at me from his outfield position — perplexed, no doubt, by Huge's one-handed batting technique — as if to say, *What gives?* I shook my head and called out to him: "He's our secret weapon!" I had no idea what I meant by that beyond being a wiseguy.

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Sides changed again, but this time Mitch's squad was out pretty quickly. Huge learned fast and was snagging some tremendous shots with real panache. My team was soon back at the "plate," and it was again Huge's turn at bat.

He went through the same quirky routine: holding the ball high above his head and spinning the bat around one-handed at blinding speed. This time he knocked out a line-drive double that smacked off Mitch's fingertips, stinging his hands red. Later in the game, on his next two at-bats, Huge hit a triple and a towering fly ball down the block that fell in for a home run.

Nobody was saying what was really on their minds, but I knew. Here was a kid who had never played stickball before, and he'd managed to hit for the cycle in just a few innings. It almost seemed as though he had misunderstood me when I had explained the game to him, and thought that he was supposed to progressively move from hitting singles to doubles to triples and then home runs.

It was again Huge's turn to hit, and I called to him as he moved toward the plate: "Hey, Huge, what are you gonna hit now? Nothing's bigger than a home run."

Huge looked at me quizzically for a moment. Then he made one of his trumpet-whinny sounds, and I could have sworn he was laughing to himself. He moved clumsily to the plate and stared far down the street.

And what a stare. It was a strange moment, and I think everyone felt it. You almost got the sense he was looking for something beyond the home run boundary of the red convertible Plymouth. He just stood there gawking for awhile. Finally, the kids in the outfield started razzing him, yelling for him to come on and hit. Then his head jerked in a funny way, like he'd found his mark or spotted something far, far down the street. But what it was I could not say. Then Huge looked over at me.

"C'mon, man," I yelled at him, laughing. "Hit already, before I grow a beard!"

And Huge did a funny thing. He raised his hand and pointed upwards and away down the street, as though he were trying to tell me something. I couldn't help but be reminded of the moment Babe Ruth supposedly pointed to the bleachers to show the crowd exactly where he was going to send the next pitch.

Then Huge held the spaldeen above his goofy-looking head, and he let it

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drop, and it fell, and he whipped the broomhandle around like the perfect batting machine he was, and the ball took off.

And it kept going.

From the first second the ball sailed over the heads of the fielders, it was clear to everyone that this shot was headed way, way beyond the red Plymouth, which meant it would sail over into the grassy lots alongside the train tracks.

Except that's not what happened.

What really occurred is subject to dispute among those who participated in the Burton Street Games — or rather, subject to uncomfortable silences, because after that summer we never talked of the events. Unquestionably, though, there was unanimity on what all of us saw, or *thought* we saw.

As the ball sailed over the red Plymouth it still had upward momentum, which appeared quite impossible to anyone watching. Then, at some point beyond the Plymouth, something happened to the sky.

Why search for different words when those I first used seem to fit the phenomenon adequately? A door opened.

It did not open in the sky itself, but rather, it seemed, in the substance of reality. What we saw, ever so briefly, was the ball sailing through an other-dimensional portal over something that could have been a gigantic, surrealistic version of a car, but could just have easily been some sort of immense vessel for traversing interplanetary oceans. I looked at Huge dreamily staring into that star-filled vortex, and saw him shake his head approvingly.

Then the door closed and everything was as before. Though, of course, everything was different forever.

Huge had proved me wrong: There was something beyond a home run. He had, quite literally, added a new dimension to the game of stickball.

Huge walked over to me and returned the broomhandle, because I was the next batter up. Mitch was running in from the outfield, calling frantically.

"Uh, like, uh, it's getting near dinner time and my Mom will raise hell. I gotta go."

"Yeah, sure, Mitch. No problem."

Suddenly, Stu and all the other guys were running in from the outfield, terror written on their faces. Everybody was making lame excuses about why they had to go home: dinner, lawns to mow, dogs to walk, chores to do. In no time the street emptied out, and it was just me and Huge standing there alone.

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I regarded him with awe, fascination, and, yes, no small amount of fear. Huge still gazed far down the street toward where the door in the sky had opened. On his unfathomable countenance was an expression that, in retrospect, I can only call wistful.

Then, without so much as a *whyuuuugh*, he walked off.

I don't know what it was that made me wait awhile and then follow him; perhaps the part of me that yearned for an ineffable "something more." Perhaps in Huge I sensed the presence of someone who would liberate me from the narrow confines of my own life. I suspected where he might live, if live was the right word: the lot where whatever had tumbled from that door in the sky had tumbled. Just maybe, I thought, he was that mysterious whatever.

I watched him from down the street as he neared the fence, expecting him to hoist himself up and climb it. Instead, he just seemed to pass straight through the metal mesh. I figured there was a hole there, but as I neared the fence I saw it was intact. Weird, I thought as I climbed over.

It was almost dark now, and I was only able to make my way because I had played war games in the lot on many occasions. Littered as it was with rocks, broken bottles and cans, the lot would have posed a threat to anyone unfamiliar with it. I heard a noise and crouched behind a nearby bush. There was Huge, sitting crosslegged against a boulder, staring up at nothing. He had some provisions, a crummy blanket, but not much else.

I waited awhile. Soon he went into a sort of trance. As I crouched there, barely breathing, I saw "things," for want of a better word, appear and disappear in the air above him. They were like tiny versions of the portal that had opened during the stickball game, like the door Mitch and I saw in the sky the day before.

Odd shapes gyrated in jet black gateways floating above him. They did not look like "images" in the air, but rather like tiny cross-sections cut out of another world. As they coalesced and evanesced, Huge's face was constricted with intense concentration, as though he were trying incredibly hard to conjure this other reality into this one. Or, I wondered, could it be that he was trying to conjure himself back into that other dimension? And was that other place "home," or, as I suspected, some universe as strange and wonderful to him as he was to me?

And what in the world did stickball have to do with all of this?

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That night, lying in bed after having quietly sneaked back over the fence, I felt I had undergone some sort of catharsis, that I had to reassess not only the normally torpid streets of Queens, but my whole view of reality. I had long believed that Queens was the ultimate hicksville, that Manhattan, the great city a subway ride away, was the exciting, decadent gotham that called to me and my ambitions. Suddenly, though, that island of skyscrapers seemed less important, less of a goal, more of a way station between here and a reality so unbounded as to be unthinkable to my adolescent imagination. I went to sleep that night with images of starships and supernovas gyrating wildly in my head.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON of the next day, I found myself standing again at the foot of Burton Street. Despite my disquiet about yesterday's events, I felt irrevocably drawn to the site of Huge's miraculous fly ball. I figured that I'd probably be the only person there, that everyone else had been permanently spooked and would have gone elsewhere for stickball — to Dieterle Crescent, maybe, or Metropolitan Boulevard.

Boy, was I wrong. One by one, over the next half-hour, those same kids who only yesterday had run home to their mamas in a panicky sweat straggled in, as though they too had been drawn by the promise of something grand and marvelous that would transform their lives forever.

Then — right on cue, as though it were the final note in a symphony, while we all stood gathered together, staring off in the same direction — we saw him. It was Huge. He ambled clumsily toward us and let out a magnificent *whyyugggh*!

Today everyone regarded him in a new light. He was no longer just a goofy looking kid. There was respect on every visage.

I finally broke the silence. "Uh, so Huge, up for some stick?"

He wiggled his head yes, and we began. And it was like the day before, only better. He put on an amazing show for us, and he seemed to know it. The sky rippled and swayed with other worlds, and every time Huge batted he hit the ball just a little farther, just a little higher, into a slightly different reality. Sometimes we saw the ball rise past dying suns, vermillion with the blood of their eternal going. Other times we saw the spaldeen fly past starships that seemed to stretch for miles. Once, we saw the ball sucked into a black hole

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at the furthest rim of nowhere-in-the-known-universe. It was hypnotic; it was unbelievable; it was like a continuous dream.

And yet, through it all, while Huge put on his sky show, I sensed something in him that was pained and disillusioned. While, for us, this was the ultimate entertainment, for him it seemed to constitute something much more personal: a quest of sorts? While we thrilled to his exhibition, he often looked glum or distracted, peering off into the portals he had opened as though searching for a lost key.

Probably all of us, at some level, had a lingering suspicion that it was all an elaborate parlor trick. I felt, as I'm sure did other kids, unsure if what I saw was actually *happening* in any usual sense of the word, or if, somehow, Huge had inserted these images in our minds. Then again, with my new enlightened attitude toward the unpredictability of the universe — even that neglible parcel containing Queens — I realized the dichotomy between the two was not so clear as I had once thought. Was there, indeed, any difference between what was "real" and what was "in my mind"? I was no longer certain. And that uncertainty itself seemed to me a good thing.

So it went all that summer. Every day we'd meet in the afternoon, and Huge would treat us to his sky show. Sometimes it would be one or two portals through which he'd hammer a thunderous arcing homer, and we'd behold new vistas of worlds and galaxies beyond our ken. Other times, a dozen or more portals would open and close in rapid succession, and we'd glimpse, almost subliminally, strange vehicles and transports past which he'd hit the ball for runs that went way off any scorecard we might have kept. Thus, while the Burton Street Games continued throughout that summer, in a truer sense they stopped being stickball-as-usual on the day Huge arrived.

Which was fine all through July, when we were still numb with the novelty of Huge's other-dimensional extravaganzas, when we were collectively as far removed from school and responsibility as we would ever be.

But something changed around the first week of August.

For me, it began at home. My mom had started drinking on top of everything else, and I'd often come home to find her asleep on the couch, a bottle of Dubonnet on the floor beside her. Dad hardly called, and then only to pretend he was interested in me. He sent me a birthday card and got my age wrong.

But so what. Big deal. It was a summer of magic, and I was beyond such petty concerns.

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Still, something was in the air, and the other kids had begun to seem distracted. I remember sitting atop a car on Burton. Mitch and I were smoking a couple of Kools he'd ripped off his mom, staring again at the sun starting its slow fall into Flushing Bay, waiting for the other kids to arrive.

"You know, Doug," said Mitch in that lugubrious way he had, as though he were inventing the words for the first time before he spoke them, "I kinda wish we could play stickball."

"Waddya mean? We do. Every night."

"Nah. I don't mean that. I mean, I wish we could just play regular, plain old stickball."

Then he turned back to the sunset, and took a drag on his Kool.

I knew exactly what he meant, because I could tell the other kids were feeling the same way. Sure, they liked Huge, and they vaguely understood that he was a miracle visitor from some other dimension or planet or time. True, they had been hypnotized with wonder all through July. But now, as August reared its sultry head, bringing with it the first reminders that school and adult responsibility would again be thrust upon them come September, a lot of the kids seemed to want, once again, to just be...well, kids.

It happened gradually, throughout the first half of August. Fewer and fewer regulars showed up for the Burton Street Games. Later, word came from Mitch that a couple of the kids, Stu among them, had been seen whacking the tar out of spaldeens at Dieterle Crescent. The defections hurt. I could even tell that Mitch himself was getting nervous, as though he'd spent a month in a dream from which it was now time to wake up.

Me, I felt that tug, too. But, like I said, I never had much in common with the kids around here. It always seemed like half the guys I knew wanted nothing more than to go into whatever profession their fathers practiced. I always wanted something more. I wanted to fling myself into wonder headlong. I didn't want to go back to being "just a regular kid" by any means. But what exactly I wanted was still unclear.

So I hung on through those dog days of August, arriving on time, regular as could be. Kids still showed up for the sky show, and Mitch dutifully came by, but I could tell he was morose and distracted.

For his part, Huge grew more and more disconsolate, if that was possible. His *whyuughs* seemed less heartfelt, and while he still tore the air apart with his towering fly balls, there seemed to be something less intense in his

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mission. If I had to guess, I'd say he was gradually giving up on finding whatever it was he searched for in those doors in the sky.

I felt deeply sorry for him, even guilty, as though I were somehow personally involved in his quest. I passionately wanted him to find whatever he was looking for. Why? Maybe I felt he was, in his own peculiar way, a bit like me. I had come to believe, without question, that it was not "home" he was looking for. I had concluded that he was an explorer who had lost his way, who ardently sought a return to his quest. It was the look in his eyes that had convinced me, as though his point of focus were light years beyond this time and place. At least, that's how it seemed to me.

And then, amazingly, it was the last week in August. School loomed like a monster on the horizon. Mom had joined AA and was getting all squishy and religious. Dad's girlfriend had dumped him, and now he wanted back. Mom was always squeamishly asking what I thought about him coming home, which meant she was eventually going to cave, and it didn't make a rat's ass of a difference if I said no.

The night of the game to end all games I was walking alone to Burton. Mom had just told me Dad would be moving back. I stomped out of the house, anticipating the fights and hollering and, eventually, the inevitable rages and beatings.

I sat atop an old Volvo, staring down the street at nothing; it felt like I was gazing into my own future. This was it, wasn't it? I thought. This was the whole shebang. I'd never do anything marvelous. I had spent my summer as a witness to wonder, and now I was going back to being smacked after dinner by my dad for lord knows what offense against his peace of mind.

I sat there for a good long while. The sun was pretty much down, but the air was still thick as soup and noontime-hot with distant rumblings of heat lightning. Street lights were coming on with their eerie, artificial glow.

No one was going to show. I could feel it in my bones. And no one did. It was the first time nobody came, and it meant the Burton Street Games had officially come to an end.

But then, as I sat there, from the distance, that gawky, ambling form came lumbering down the street. He walked right up to me and nodded his goofy nod.

"No game tonight, Huge," I said. "No one's coming. It's over for the summer."

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Huge turned to me and did something totally out of character: He smiled at me. I saw something in those bizarre yellowy eyes of his, something like triumph. The melancholy that had dogged him these last weeks seemed to have evaporated. What was this about? He took the stickball bat from my hand and held it out to me, a look of ecstasy on his face.

"We can't play, Huge. Don't you get it? There's no one here."

He shook his head no, and pointed to himself and to me.

"Yeah, sure, there's us. But what can we do?"

He thrust the stickball bat into my hand and he shuffled down the street to the field.

"Yeah, okay," I said. "If you wanna play fungo for awhile that's fine with me."

So we began. And it started typically enough. I knocked grounders and line drives toward Huge, who now could field with the best of them. Then Huge started gesturing to the sky behind him.

"You want me to hit fly balls? Sure, okay, if you want."

And I began knocking some tall ones down the street — real high, so he had a chance to get under them. Then he started shaking his head, pointing even farther down the street.

"Hey, Huge, that's your specialty, not mine."

He shook his head furiously in disagreement, so I figured, what the hell, I'd just try and whack the daylights out of the ball.

As I readied to do so, something entered my mind, like a living force, and I saw Huge staring at me with a terrifying intensity I had never seen before or since on the countenance of any living creature. I felt infused with sheer energy, as though I were an explosion waiting to happen, as though forces were building and coalescing in me that had to be released. I wasn't sure if I was about to die or disappear, but I knew one thing: I had to hit that ball as hard as I could.

I looked down the street and saw Huge smiling, as though he was satisfied I was ready. Then I realized this is what Huge had been leading up to all summer: This moment, just him and me, was part of whatever weird magic, science or both that Huge was invested with, which he had now temporarily passed on to me, which was, somehow, to be transformed in the unlikely game of stickball.

Then Huge was running, running down that street as far and as fast as he could.

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I knew what I had to do.

I held that ball high above my head, and it glowed, literally, with an unearthly blue incandescence. The bat in my hand vibrated with a living power; it felt like a hundred electric eels all squirming to discharge their voltage into the night.

Then I let that ball drop. And I whizzed that bat around one-handed. And I connected.

Or, rather, whatever mysterious force possessed me connected, and that ball took off, not as a projectile takes off, but as a rocketship takes off, roaring at a furious speed down the street in a line drive headed toward the receding figure of Huge. In a flash, it was over his head, and just passing him as he ran faster, faster building up a locomotive's momentum.

Then the entire world exploded. The sky opened up—not like a door this time, but more like a vast theater curtain pulled aside to reveal an immense, unfathomable, star-drenched ocean. It was dizzying, inexpressible, complex beyond retelling. And into this incomprehensible panorama the distant figure of Huge leapt...and disappeared.

The curtain snapped shut. The next thing I remember was the muggy night breeze and the cicadas chirping. I stood there dazed.

Summer was officially over.

After Dad came home to stay, I spent a lot of time in my room reading — partly to avoid him, partly to discover something in novels I no longer found in my daily life now that Huge was gone. As a result of my bookish activities, I learned that a story like this is supposed to have one of two endings.

In the first, I return to Burton Street day after day, to that vacant lot, looking for some sign of Huge, some trinket or memento of his being there, something that proves we weren't all suffering from a kind of mass hysteria. Well, I did go back to the lot, but I found nothing, not even his tattered blanket or the remnants of his few provisions.

In the other ending, I come away from my experience having "learned a lesson," a sudden understanding of how that magical-something-extra I've been looking for was always in my own back yard after all. That didn't happen either. I still wanted something more than the streets of Queens had to offer, and I was still unsure what that was.

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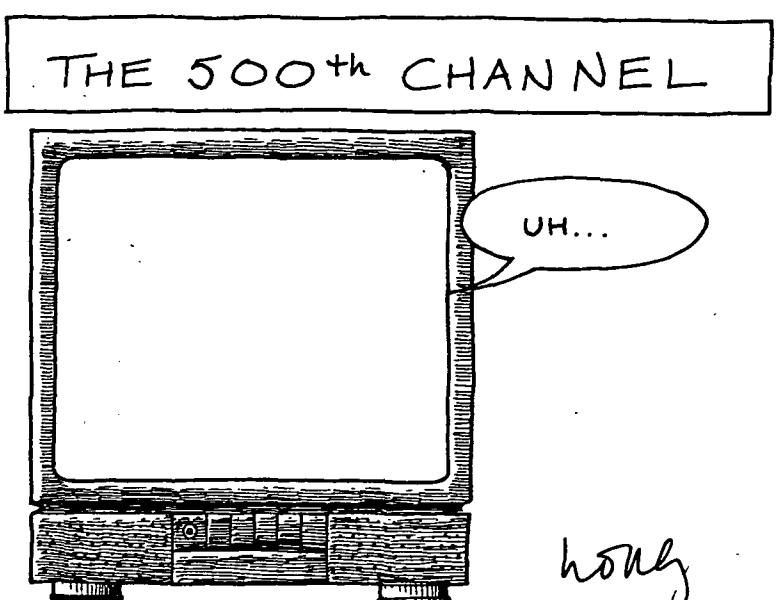
No, this story ends messily, in uncertainty, with a bunch of kids going back to school to resume their normal day-to-day lives. As before, we hung out, we fought, we smoked cigarettes in alleys, and, yes, we played stickball.

But no one ever mentioned Huge.

Me, I'm "all grown up" now, but no more satisfied with the world. I still wait for something wonderful to happen. I know it probably won't. It's the child in me that just won't let go, the part of me that still returns in the occasional dream to Burton Street, to the night when it was just me and Huge playing fungo, knocking fly balls down the street, tearing apart the fabric of reality with our bare hands.



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Dale Bailey's frequent appearances in F&SF *have received a lot of attention. "Home Burial," which appeared in our December issue, came out to critical acclaim. His story "Giants in the Earth" (August, 1994) has just been reprinted in* The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, *edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling.*

Dale sent a baseball story too late for last summer's issue, so we saved it for this summer. "The Resurrection Man's Legacy" manages to combine the feel of early Bradbury with early Asimov to come up with a heart-warming tale that could only be written by Bailey.

The Resurrection Man's Legacy

By Dale Bailey

I DID NOT KNOW THE PHRASE "resurrection man" eighteen years ago. I was a boy then; such men were yet uncommon.

I know it now — we all know it — and yet the phrase retains for me a haunting quality, simultaneously wondrous and frightening. I met him only once, *my* resurrection man, on the cusp of a hazy August morning, but he haunts me still in subtle and unspoken ways: when I look in the mirror and see my face, like my father's face; or when I take the diamond, my uniform shining beneath the ranks of floodlights, and hear the infield chatter, like music if you love the game.

And I do. I do.

It was among the things he bequeathed to me, that love, though he could not have known it. We do not understand the consequences of the actions we take, the meaning of the legacies we leave. We cannot.

They are ghosts of sorts, actions in a vacuum where all action has passed, inheritances from the inscrutable dead. Legacies.

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They can be gifts and they can be curses. Sometimes they can be both.

My father returned to the States in April of 1948, following the bloody, methodical invasion of Japan, and he married my mother the week he landed. She died in childbirth eleven months later, and I sometimes wonder if he ever forgave me. One other significant event occurred in '49: Casey Stengel, a ne'er-do-well journeyman manager, led the Yankees to the first of an unprecedented five straight victories in the World Series.

Twelve years later, in 1961, my father died too. That was the year Roger Maris came to bat in the fourth inning of the season's final game and drove his sixty-first home run into the right-field seats at Yankee Stadium, breaking Babe Ruth's record for single-season homers. In Baltimore, we still say that the new record is meaningless, that Maris played in a season six games longer than that of our home-grown hero; but even then, in our hearts, we knew it wasn't true.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

Two days after my father's death, the monorail whisked me from Baltimore to St. Louis. I had never been away from home. The journey was a nightmare journey. The landscape blurred beyond the shining curve of the window, whether through speed or tears, I could not tell.

My great aunt Rachel Powers met me at the station. Previously, I had known her only from a photograph pasted in the family album. A young woman then, she possessed a beauty that seemed to radiate color through the black and white print. She wore an androgynous flat-busted dress and her eyes blazed from above sharpened cheek bones with such unnerving intensity that, even in the photograph, I could not meet them for more than a moment.

The photograph had been taken forty years before my father's death, but I knew her instantly when I saw her on the platform.

"Jake Lamont?" she said.

I nodded, struck speechless. Tall and lean, she wore a billowing white frock and a white hat, like a young bride. The years had not touched her. She might have been sixteen, she might have been twenty. And then she lifted the veil that obscured her face, shattering the illusion of youth. I saw the same high, sharp cheek bones, the same intense eyes — blue; why had I never wondered? — but her flesh was seamed and spotted with age.

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"Well, then," she said. "So you're a boy. I don't know much about boys." And then, when I still did not speak, "Are you mute, child?"

My fingers tightened around the handle of my traveling case. "No, ma'am."

"Well, good. Come along, then."

Without sparing me another glance, she disappeared into the throng. Half-fearful of being left in the noisy, crowded station, I lit out after her, dragging my suitcase behind me. Outside, in the clear midwestern heat, we loaded the suitcase into the trunk of a weary '53 Cadillac, one of those acre-long cars that Detroit began to produce in the fat years after the war.

We drove into farming country, on single-lane blacktop roads where you could cruise for hours and never see another car. We did not speak, though I watched her surreptitiously. Her intense eyes never deviated from the road, unswerving between the endless rows of corn. I cracked the window, and the car filled with the smell of August in Missouri — the smell of moist earth and cow manure, and green, growing things striving toward maturity, and the slow decline into September. That smell was lovely and alien, like nothing I had ever smelled in Baltimore.

At last, we came to the town, Stowes Corners, situated in a region of low, green hills. She took me through wide, tree-shadowed streets. I saw the courthouse, and the broad spacious lawn of the town square. On a quiet street lined with oak, my aunt pointed out the school, an unassuming antique brick, dwarfed by the monstrous edifice I had known in the city.

"That's where your father went to school when he was a boy," my aunt said, and a swift electric surge of anger —

— *how could he abandon me*? —

— jolted along my spine. I closed my eyes, and pressed my face against the cool window. The engine rumbled as the car pulled away from the curb, and when I opened my eyes again, we had turned into a long gravel drive. The caddy mounted a short rise topped by a stand of maples, and emerged from the trees into sunlight and open air. My aunt paused there — in the days to come I would learn that she always paused there, she took a languorous, almost sensual delight in the land — and in the valley below I saw the house.

It had been a fine old farmhouse once, my aunt would later tell me, but that had been years ago; now, the surrounding fields lost to creditors, the house had begun the inevitable slide into genteel decay. Sun-bleached and

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worn, scabrous with peeling paint, it retained merely a glimmer of its former splendor. Even then, in my clumsy inarticulate fashion, I could see that it was like my aunt, a luminous fragment of a more refined era that had survived diminished into this whirling and cacophonous age.

"This is your home now," my aunt said, and without waiting for me to respond — what could I say? — she touched the gas and the car descended.

Inside, the house was silence and stillness and tattered elegance. The furnishings, though frayed, shone with a hard gloss, as if my aunt had determined, through sheer dint of effort, to hold back the ravages of years. A breeze stirred in the surrounding hills and chased itself through the open windows, bearing to me a faint lemony scent of furniture polish as I followed my aunt upstairs. She walked slowly, painfully, one hand bracing her back, the other clutching the rail. She led me to a small room and watched from the doorway as I placed my suitcase on the narrow bed. I did not look at her as she crossed the room and sat beside me. The springs complained rustily. I opened my suitcase, dug beneath my clothes, and withdrew the photograph I had brought from Baltimore. It was the only picture I had of my father and me together. Tears welled up inside me. I bit my lip and looked out the window, into the long treeless expanse of the back yard, desolate in a cruel fall of sunshine.

Aunt Rachel said, "Jake."

She said, "Jake, this isn't easy for either of us. I am an old woman and I am set in my ways. I have lived alone for thirty-five years, and I can be as ugly and unpleasant as a bear. I don't know the first thing about boys. You must remember this when things are hard between us."

"Yes, ma'am."

I felt her cool fingers touch my face. She took my chin firmly, and we stared into each other's faces for a time. She pressed her mouth into a thin indomitable line.

"You will look at me when I speak to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The fingers dropped from my face. "That's one of my rules. This isn't Baltimore, Jake. I'm not your father. He was a good boy, and I'm sure he was a fine man, but it strikes me that young people today are too lenient with their children. I will not tolerate disrespect."

"No, ma'am."

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"Good." She smiled and smoothed her dress across her thighs. "I'm glad you've come to me, Jake," she said. "I hope we can be friends."

Before I could speak, she stood and left the room, closing the door behind her. I went around the bed and lifted the window. The breeze swept in, flooding the room with that alien smell of green things growing. I threw myself on the bed and drew my father's picture to my breast.

Among the photographs that are important to me number three relics of my youth. They are arranged across my desk like talismans as I write.

The first photograph, which I have already described to you, is that of my aunt as she must have looked in 1918 or '19, when she was a girl.

The second photograph is of my mother as she was in the days when my father knew her; aside from the photograph I have nothing of her. Perhaps my father felt that in hoarding whatever memories he had of her, he could possess her even in death. Or perhaps he simply could not bring himself to speak of her. I know he must have loved her, for every year on my birthday, the anniversary of her death, he drew into himself, became taciturn and insular in a way that in retrospect seems atypical, for he was a cheerful man, even buoyant. Beyond that I do not know; he was scrupulous in his destruction of every vestige of her. When he died, I found nothing. No photographs, but the one I still possess. No letters. Not even her rings; I suppose she wore them to the grave.

The third photograph I have mentioned also. It is of my father and me, when I was eleven, and it captures a great irony. Though it was taken in a ballpark — Baltimore's Memorial Stadium — my father did not love baseball. I don't remember why we went to that game — perhaps someone gave him the tickets — but we never attended another. That was when I felt it first, my passion for the sport; immediately, it appealed to me — its order and symmetry, its precision. Nothing else in sports rivals the moment when the batter steps into the box and faces the pitcher across sixty feet of shaven green. The entire game is concentrated into that instant, the skills of a lifetime distilled into every pitch; and no one, no one in the world but those two men, has any power to alter the course of the game.

In those days, of course, I did not think of it in such terms; my passion for the sport was nascent, rudimentary. All I knew was that I enjoyed the game, that someday I would like to see another. That much is my father's due.

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The rest, indirectly anyway, was the resurrection man's gift, his legacy. But I have no photograph of him.

I slept uneasily that first night in Stowes Corners, unaccustomed to the rural quiet that cradled the house. The nightly symphony of traffic and voices to which I had been accustomed was absent, and the silence imparted a somehow ominous quality to the stealthy mouse-like chitterings of the automaids as they scurried about the sleeping house.

I woke unrested to the sound of voices drifting up from the parlor. Strange voices — my aunt's, only half-familiar yet, and a second voice, utterly unknown, mellifluous and slow and fawningly ingratiating.

This voice was saying, "You *do* realize, Miss Powers, there are limits to what we are permitted to do?"

I eased out of bed in my pajamas and crept along the spacious hall to the head of the stairs, the hardwood floor cool against my bare feet.

My aunt said, "Limits? The advertising gave me the impression you could do most anything."

I seated myself on the landing in the prickly silence that followed. A breeze soughed through the upstairs windows. Through the half-open door in the ornate foyer below, I could see a car parked in the circular drive. Beyond the car, the morning sun gleamed against the stand of maple and sent a drowsy haze of mist steaming away into the open sky.

My aunt was rattling papers below. "It doesn't say anything about limits here."

"No, ma'am, of course not. And I didn't mean to imply that our products were not convincing. Not by any means."

"Then what do you mean by limits?

The stranger cleared his throat. "Not technological limits, ma'am. Those exist, of course, but they're not the issue here."

"Well, what in heaven's name *is* the issue?"

"It's a legal matter, ma'am — a constitutional matter, even. We're a young company, you know, and our product is new and unfamiliar and there's bound to be some controversy, as you might well imagine." He paused, and I could hear him fumbling about through his paraphernalia. A moment later I heard the sharp distinct *snick* of a lighter.

He smoked, of course. In those days, all men smoked, and the acrid gritty

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stink of tobacco smoke which now began to drift up the stairs reminded me of my father.

I do not smoke. I never have.

"Our company," he resumed, "we're cognizant of the objections folks might raise to our product. The Church — all the churches — are going to be a problem. And the doctors are going to have a field day with the need to come to terms with grief. We know that — our founder, Mr. Hiram Wallace, he *knows* that, he's an intelligent man, but he's committed. We're all committed. Do you know anything about Mr. Wallace, ma'am?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"It's an inspiring story, a story I think you ought to hear. Anybody who's thinking of contracting with us ought to hear it. Do you mind?"

My aunt sighed. I heard her adjust herself in her chair, and I could imagine them in the quaint, spotless parlor I had seen the night before: my aunt in her white dress, her hands crossed like a girl's over the advertising packet in her lap; the resurrection man, leaning forward from the loveseat, a cigarette dangling between his fingers.

Aunt Rachel said, "Go ahead then."

"It's a tragedy, really," the resurrection man said, "but it ends in triumph. For you see, Mr. Wallace's first wife, she was hit by a bus on their honeymoon — "

"Oh, my!"

"Yes, ma'am, that's right, a bus." There was a hardy smack as the resurrection man slammed his hands together; I could hear it even at the top of the stairs. "Like that," he said, "so sudden. Mr. Wallace was heartbroken. He knows what you're feeling, ma'am, he knows what your boy upstairs is feeling, and he wants to help — "

With these words, an icy net of apprehension closed around my heart, and the tenor of my eavesdropping swerved abruptly from mild curiosity to a kind of breathless dread. The resurrection man's next words came sluggish and dim. I felt as if I had been wrapped in cotton. The landing had grown oppressively hot.

"The potential applications for this technology are mind-boggling," he was saying. "And I won't lie to you, ma'am, Mr. Wallace is exploring those avenues. But this, this service to the grief-stricken and the lonely, this is where his heart lies. That's why we're offering this service before any other,

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ma'am, and that's why there are limits to what we can do."

"But I'm afraid I still don't understand."

"Let me see if I can clarify, ma'am. Of all the forces arrayed against us — all the people like the churches and the doctors who'd like to see our enterprise go down the tubes — our single most dangerous adversary is the government itself. Our senators and representatives are frankly scared to death of this."

"But why?"

"It's the question of legal status, ma'am. What does it take to be a human being? That's the question. All the agreements we've worked out with congressional committees and sub-committees — it seems like a hundred of them — all the agreements boil down to one thing: these, these...beings...must be recognizably non-human, limited in intellect, artificial in appearance. No one wants to grapple with the big questions, ma'am. No one wants to take on the churches, especially our elected officials. They're all cowards."

Aunt Rachel said, "I see," in a quiet, thoughtful kind of voice, but she didn't say anything more.

In the silence that followed, something of the magnitude of my aunt's devotion came to me. I did not know much about Stowes Corners, but I suspected with a twelve-year old's inarticulate sense of such things, that the town was as rigidly provincial in perspective as in appearance. Whatever the stranger below was selling my aunt, he had clearly come a long way to sell it; there could be no need for such controversial...beings, as he had called them...here — here in a place where my aunt had told me that she was among the few folks in town who owned automaids.

I couldn't really afford them, Jake, she had said last night at supper, *but the work was getting to be too much for me. I'm glad you've come to help me.*

Now, with the sun rising over the maples and throwing sharp glints off the car in the drive, the resurrection man coughed. "I hope you're still interested, Miss Powers."

"Well, I don't know a thing about boys," she said. "And I don't want him growing up without a father. It isn't right that a boy grow up without a man in the house."

That icy net of apprehension drew still tighter about my heart. My stomach executed a slow perfect roll, and the sour tang of bile flooded my mouth. I leaned my head against the newel and shut my eyes.

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"I agree entirely, ma'am," came the other voice. "A boy needs a father. You can rest assured we'll do our best."

From below, there came the rustle of people standing, the murmured pleasantries of leave-taking. My aunt asked how long it would take, and the resurrection man said not long, we'll simply modify a pre-fab model along the lines suggested by the photos and recordings — and through all this babble a single thought burst with unbearable clarity:

Nothing, nothing would ever be the same again.

I stood, and fled down the hall, down the back stairs. I slammed through the kitchen and into the gathering heat.

When the front door swung open, I was waiting. As the resurrection man — this stout, balding man dressed in a dark suit, and a wide bright tie; this unprepossessing man, unknowing and unknown, who would shape the course of my existence — as this man rounded the corner of his car, his case in hand, I hurled myself at him. Frenzied, I hurled myself at him, flailing at his chest. "What are you going to do?" I cried.

Strong hands pinned my arms to my sides and lifted me from the ground. The rancid odors of after-shave and tobacco enveloped me, and I saw that sweat stood in a dark ring around his collar. "Calm down!" he shouted. "Just calm down, son! Are you crazy?"

He thrust me from him. Half-blinded by tears, I stumbled away, swiping angrily at my eyes with my knuckles. Without speaking, the resurrection man dusted his suit and retrieved his case. He got in his car and drove away, and though I could not know it then, I would never see him again.

MY FATHER'S BODY came by slowtrain several days later. He had returned to Stowes Corners only once in the years after the war, to see my mother into the earth where her family awaited her. Now, at last, he came to join her; we buried him in the sun-dappled obscurity of a Missouri noon.

As the minister quietly recited the ritual, a soft wind lilted through the swallow-thronged trees, bearing to me the sweet fragrances of freshly turned earth and new-mown grass. I watched an intricate pattern of light and leaf-shadow play across my aunt's face, but I saw no tears. Her still emotionless features mirrored my own. The service seemed appropriate — minimal and isolated, infinitely distant from the places and people my father had known.

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There was only the minister, my aunt, and myself. No one else attended.

When the minister had finished, I knelt before my mother's tombstone and reached out a single finger to trace her name. And then I clutched a handful of soil and let it trickle through my fingers into my father's grave. I shall never forget the sound it made as it spattered the casket's polished lid.

Several years ago, I chanced upon an archaeologist's account of his experience excavating a ruined city, abandoned beneath the sand for thousands of years. Such a project is an exercise in meticulous drudgery; the earth does not readily divulge her secrets. Stratum after stratum of sand must be sifted, countless fragments painstakingly extracted and catalogued and fitted together for interpretation. You are in truth excavating not one city, but many cities, each built on the rubble of the one which preceded it.

I am reminded of this now, for recollection, like archaeology, is a matter of sifting through ruins. Memory is frail and untrustworthy, tainted by desire; what evidence remains is fragmentary, shrouded in the mystery of the irretrievable past. You cannot recover history; you can only reconstruct it, build it anew from the shards that have survived, searching always for the seams between the strata, those places of demarcation between the city that was and the city that would be, between the self that you were and the self you have become.

How do you reconstruct a past, when only potsherds and photographs remain?

A moment, then.

An instant from the quiet, hot August day my father was interred — one of those timeless instants that stands like a seam between the geologic strata of a buried city, between the boy I was and the man I have become:

Afternoon.

In the room where I slept, the blinds rattled, but otherwise all was silent. Outside, somewhere, the world moved on. Tiny gusts leavened the heat and lifted the luminous scent of pollen into the afternoon, but through the open window there came only a cloying funerary pall. Far away, the sun shone; it announced its presence here only as an anemic gleam behind the lowered blinds, insufficient to dispel the gloom.

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I stood before the closet, fumbling with my tie. My eyes stung and my stomach had drawn into an agonizing knot, but I refused to cry. I was repeating a kind of litany to myself —

— *I will not cry, I will not* —

— when a voice said:

"Hello, Jake."

My spine stiffened. The tiny hairs along my back stirred, as if a dark gust from some October landscape had swept into the room.

It was my father's voice.

I did not turn. Without a word, I shrugged off my jacket and swung open the closet door. In the dim reflection of the mirror hung inside, I could see a quiet figure, preternatural in its stillness, seated in the far shadowy corner by the bed.

I don't want him growing up without a father, my aunt had said. *It isn't right that a boy grow up without a man in the house.*

What in God's name had she done?

The figure said, "Don't be afraid, Jake."

"I'm not afraid," I said. But my hands shook as I fumbled at the buttons on my shirt. I groped for a hanger, draped the shirt around it, and thrust it into the depths of the closet, feeling exposed in my nakedness, vulnerable, but determined not to allow this...*being*, the resurrection man had called it...to sense that. Kicking away my slacks, I fished a pair of jeans out of the closet.

In the mirror, I saw the figure stand.

I said, "Don't come near me."

And that voice — *my God, that voice* — said, "Don't be afraid."

It smiled and lifted a hand to the window, each precise, economical gesture accompanied by a faint mechanical hum, as though somewhere far down in the depths of its being, flywheels whirred and gears meshed in intricate symphony. I watched as it gripped the cord and raised the blind.

The room seemed to ignite. Sunlight glanced out of the mirror and rippled in the glossy depths of the headboard and nightstand. A thousand spinning motes of dust flared, and I winced as my eyes adjusted. Then, my heart pounding, I closed the closet door, and at last, at last I turned around.

It was my father — from the dark hair touched gray at the temples to the slight smiling crinkles around the eyes to the slim athletic build, seeming to radiate poise and grace even in repose — in every detail, it was my father. It

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sat once again in the wooden chair by the nightstand, stiffly erect, its blunt fingers splayed on the thighs of its jeans, and returned my stare from my father's eyes. I felt a quick hot swell of anger and regret —

— *how could you abandon me*? —

— felt something tear away inside of me. I blinked back tears.

"My God, what are you?"

"Jake," it said. It said, "Jake, don't cry."

That swift tide of anger, burning, swept through me, obliterating all. "Don't you tell me what to do."

The thing seemed taken aback. It composed its features into an expression of startled dismay; its mouth moved, but it said nothing. We stared across the room at one another until at last it looked away. It lifted the framed photograph that stood on the nightstand. A moment passed, and then another, while it gazed into the picture. I wondered what it saw there, in that tiny image of the man it was pretending to be.

One thick finger caressed the gilded frame. "Is that Memorial Stadium?"

It looked up, smiling tentatively, and I crossed the room in three angry strides. I tore the photograph out of the thing's hands, and then the tears boiled out of me, burning and shameful.

"You don't know anything about it!" I cried, flinging myself on the bed. The creature stood, its hands outstretched, saying, "Jake, Jake — " but I rushed on, I would not listen: "You're not my father! You don't know anything about it! Anything, you hear me? So just go away and leave me alone!" In the end, I was screaming.

The thing straightened. "Okay, Jake. If that's the way you want it." And it crossed the room, and went out into the hall, closing the door softly behind it.

I lay back on the bed. After a while, my aunt called me for supper, but I didn't answer. She didn't call again. Outside, it began to grow dark, and finally a heavy silence enclosed the house. Eventually, I heard tiny mutterings and whisperings as the automaids crept from their holes and crannies and began to whisk away the debris of another day, but through it all, I did not move. I lay wide awake, staring blindly at the dark ceiling.

During the days that followed my aunt and I moved about the house like wraiths, mute and insubstantial, imprisoned by the unacknowledged

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presence of this monstrous being, this creature that was my father and not my father. We did not mention it; I dared not ask, she proffered no explanation. Indeed, I might have imagined the entire episode, except I glimpsed it now and then — trimming the shrubs with garden shears or soaping down the caddy in the heat, and once, in a tableau that haunts me still, standing dumb in the darkened parlor, gazing expressionlessly at the wall with a concentration no human being could muster.

Inexorably the afternoons grew shorter, the maple leaves began to turn, and somehow, somewhere in all the endless moments, August passed into September.

One morning before the sun had burned the fog off the hills, my aunt awoke me. I dressed quietly, and together we walked into the cool morning, the gravel crunching beneath our feet. She drove me to the school my father had attended all those long years ago, a mile away, and as I stepped from the car she pressed a quarter into my hand.

"Come here," she said, and when I came around the car to the open window, she leaned out and kissed me. Her lips were dry and hard, with the texture of withered leaves.

She looked away, through the glare of windshield, where morning was breaking across the town. A bell began to ring, and noisy clusters of children ran by us, shouting laughter, but I did not move. The two of us might have been enclosed in a thin impermeable bubble, isolated from the world around us. Her knuckles had whitened atop the steering wheel.

"You can walk home," she said, "you know the way," and when I did not answer, she cleared her throat. "Well, then, good luck," she said, and I felt a reply — what it might have been, I cannot know — catch in my throat. Before I could dislodge it, the car pulled from the curb.

I turned to the school. The bell continued to ring. Another clump of children swept by, and I drifted along like flotsam in their wake. I mounted the steps to the building slowly and carefully, as if the slightest jolt would destabilize the churning energies that had been compressed within me. I was a bomb, I could have ticked.

My aunt and I were in the kitchen, eating supper, that wall of impregnable silence between us. I ate with studied nonchalance, gazing steadfastly into my plate, or staring off into the dining room beyond the kitchen. The

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creature that looked like my father sat alone in there, shadowy and imperturbable, its hands folded neatly on the table.

Aunt Rachel said, "Jake, it's time to move on with your life. You must accept your father's death and go on. You cannot grieve forever."

I pushed my vegetables around my plate. Words swollen and poisonous formed in my gut; I could not force them into my throat.

She said, "Jake, I want to be your friend."

Again, I did not answer. I looked off into the dining room. The thing looked back, silent, inscrutable. And then, almost without thought, I began to speak, expelling the words in a deadly emotionless monotone: "You must be crazy. Do you think that thing can replace him?"

Aunt Rachel lowered her fork with shaking fingers. Her lips had gone white. "Of course not. Your father can never be replaced, Jake."

"That's not my father," I said. "It's nothing like him!"

"Jake, I know — "

But she could not finish. I found myself standing, my napkin clenched in one hand. Screaming: "It's not! It's not a thing like him! You must be crazy, you old witch — "

And then I was silent. A deadly calm descended in the kitchen. I felt lightheaded, as though I were floating somewhere around the ceiling, tethered to my body by the most tenuous of threads. The things I had said made no sense, I knew, but they felt true.

My aunt said, "Look me in the eye, Jake."

I forced my stone-heavy eyes to meet hers.

"You must never speak to me like that again," she said. "Do you understand?"

Biting my lip, I nodded.

"Your father is dead," she told me. "I understand you are in pain, but it is time you face the facts and begin to consider the feelings of others again. You must never run away from the truth, Jake, however unpleasant. Because once you begin running, you can never stop."

She folded her napkin neatly beside her plate and pushed her chair away from the table. "Come here," she said. "Bend over and put your hands on your knees."

Reluctantly, I did as she asked. She struck me three quick painless blows across the backside, and I felt tears of humiliation well up in my eyes. I bit my

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lip — bit back the tears — and finished my meal in silence, but afterwards I crept upstairs to stretch on the narrow bed and stare at the familiar ceiling. A sharp woodsy odor of burning leaves drifted through the window, and shadows slowly inhabited the room. An orchestra of insects began to warm up in the long flat space behind the house.

I dozed, and woke later in the night to a room spun full of gossamer moonlight. The creature sat in the chair by the nightstand, cradling the photograph in its unlined hands. It looked up, something whirring in its neck, and placed the photograph on the nightstand where I could see it.

"I'll go if you like," it said.

I sat up, wincing. "Light, please," I told the lamp, and as the room brightened, I gazed into the picture. A boy curiously unlike myself gazed back at me, eyes shining, arm draped about the slim, dark-headed man next to him. My father's lean beard-shadowed face had already begun to grow unfamiliar. Looking at the photograph, I could see him — how could I not? — but at night, in the darkness, I could not picture him. His lips came to me, or his eyes, or the long curve of his jaw, but they came like pieces of a worn-out jigsaw puzzle — they would not fit together true. And now, of course, he is lost to me utterly; only sometimes, when I look into a mirror, I catch a glimpse of him there and it frightens me.

I reached out a finger to the photograph. Glass. Cold glass, walling me away forever.

I remembered the dirt as it trickled through my fingers; I remembered the sound it made as it spattered the lid of the casket.

"You're not my father," I said.

"No."

We were quiet for a while. Something small and toothy gnawed away inside me.

"What are you?" I asked.

"I'm a machine."

"That's all? Just a machine, like a car or a radio?"

"Something like that. More complicated. A simulated person, they call me — a sim. I'm a new thing. There aren't many machines in the world like me, though maybe there will be."

"I could cut you off," I said. "I could just cut you off."

"Yes."

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"And if I do?"

The sim lifted its hands and shrugged. "Gone," it said. "Erased and irrecoverable. Everything that makes me me."

"Show me. I want to know."

The sim's expression did not change. It merely leaned forward and lifted the thick hair along its neck. And there it was: a tiny switch, like a jewel gleaming in the light. I reached out and touched it, ran my finger through the coarse hair, touched the skin, rubbery and cold, thinking of what he had said: *Erased and irrecoverable.*

"You're a machine," I said. "That's all." And everything — the fear and anger, the hope and despair — everything drained out of me, leaving a crystalline void. I was glass. If you had touched me, I would have shattered into a thousand shining fragments. "My aunt must be crazy."

"Perhaps she only wants to make you happy."

"You can't replace my father."

"I don't want to."

Insects had begun to hurl themselves at the window screen, and I told the light to shut itself off. The darkness seemed much thicker than before, and I could perceive the sim only as a silhouette against the bright moonlit square of the window. It reached out and picked up the photograph again and I thought: *It can see in the dark.*

Who knew what it could do?

The sim said, "Did you go to many games at Memorial Park?"

"You ought to know. You're supposed to be just like him."

"I hardly know a thing about him," the sim said. And then: "Jake, I'm not really a thing like him at all. I just look like him."

"That was the only game we ever went to."

"I see."

All at once that day came flooding back to me — its sights and sounds, its sensations. I wanted to describe the agony of suspense that built with every pitch, the hush of the crowd and the flat audible crack of the bat when a slugger launched the ball clear into the summer void, a pale blur against the vaulted blue. I remembered those things, and more: the oniony smell of the hot dogs and relish my father and I had shared, the bite of an icy Coke in the heat, and through it all the recurrent celebratory strain of the calliope. A thousand things I could not say.

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So we sat there in silence, and finally the sim said, "Do you think we could be friends?"

I shrugged, thinking of my aunt. She too had wished to be my friend. Now, in the silent moonlit bedroom, the scene at the table came back to me. An oily rush of shame surged through me. "Is it really so bad, running away?"

"I don't know. I don't know things like that."

"What am I going to do?"

"Maybe you don't have to run away." The sim cocked its head with a mechanical hum. A soft crescent of moonlight illuminated one cheek, and I could see a single eye, flat and depthless as polished tin. But all the rest was shadow. It said, "I'm not your father, Jake. But I could be your friend."

Without speaking, I lay down, pulled the covers up to my chin, and listened for a while to the whispery chatter of the automaids as they scoured the bottom floor. A breeze murmured about the eaves, and somewhere far away in the hills, an owl hooted, comforting and friendly, and that was a sound I had never heard in Baltimore.

I had just begun to doze when the sim spoke again.

"Maybe sometime we can pitch the ball around," it said, and through the thickening web of sleep I thought, for just a moment, that it was my father. But, of course, it wasn't. An unutterable tide of grief washed over me, bearing me to an uneasy shore of dreams.

THAT OCTOBER, I sat alone in the sun-drenched parlor and listened to the week-end games of the '61 World Series on my aunt's radio. The Yankee sluggers had gone cold. Mantle, recovering from late-season surgery, batted only six times in the whole series; Maris had spent himself in the chase for Babe Ruth's single-season home run record.

Yankee hurler Whitey Ford took up the slack. I read about his game one shut-out in the newspaper. Four days later, when he took the mound again, I listened from hundreds of miles away. In the third inning, the sim came into the room and sat down across from me. It steepled its fingers and closed its eyes. We did not speak.

Ford pitched two more flawless innings before retiring with an injury in the sixth.

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I stood up, suddenly angry, and glared at the sim. "You ought to have a name, I guess," I said.

The sim opened its eyes. It did not speak.

"I'll call you Ford," I said bitterly. "That's a machine's name."

Dreams plagued me that year. One night, I seemed to wake in the midst of a cheering crowd at Memorial Stadium. But gradually the park grew hushed. The game halted below, and the players, the bright-clad vendors, the vast silent throng — one by one, they turned upon me their voiceless gaze. I saw that I was surrounded by the dead: my father, the mother I had never known, a thousand others, all the twisted, shrunken dead. A tainted wind gusted among the seats, fanning my hair, and the silent corpses began to crumble. Desiccated flesh sloughed like ash from the bones, whirled in dark funnels through the stands. And then the air cleared, and I saw that the dead were lost to me forever. Silence reigned, and emptiness. Endless empty rows.

Day turned into dream-haunted night and into day again. My father receded in memory, as if I had known him a hundred years ago. My life in Baltimore might have been another boy's life, distant and unreal. I was agreeable, but distant with my aunt; I ignored Ford for the most part. I passed long stifling hours in school, staring dreamily, day after day, across the abandoned playground to the baseball diamond, dusty and vacant in the afternoon. I had no interest in studies. Even now, I remember my aunt's crestfallen expression as she inspected my report cards, the rows of D's and F's, or the section reserved for comments, where Mrs. O'Leary wrote, *Jake is well-behaved and has ability, but he is moody and lacks discipline.*

In March of '62, on my birthday, I came home from school to find a hand-stitched regulation baseball, a leather fielder's glove, and a Louisville Slugger, knotted with a shiny ribbon, arranged on my bed. I caressed the soft leather glove.

From the doorway, my aunt said, "Do you like them, Jake?"

I slipped on the glove, turned the ball pensively with my right hand, and flipped it toward the ceiling. It hung there for a moment, spinning like a jewel in the sunlight, and then it plunged toward the floor. My left hand leaped forward, the glove seemed to open of its own accord, and the ball dropped solidly into the pocket.

Nothing had ever felt so right.

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I said, "I love them."

My aunt sat on the bed, wincing. Already, the arthritis had begun its bitter, surreptitious campaign. She smoothed her dress across her knees.

I brought the glove to my face. Closing my eyes, I drew in the deep, leathery aroma. "Gosh," I said, "they're fine...I mean, they're *really* fine. How did you ever know?"

My aunt smiled. "We're getting to know you, now. Besides I had some help."

"Help?"

She nodded, and touched the bat. "Only the best," she said. "Ford insisted on it."

"It's...well, it's just tremendous. I mean, thank you."

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to my cheek. "Happy Birthday, Jake. I'm glad you like them." She lifted her hands to my shoulders and gently pushed me erect. "Now, look me in the eye," she said. "There's something we need to talk about."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I've made some phone calls. I've talked to Mrs. O'Leary and some other folks at school."

I glanced away, let the baseball slip from my glove into my waiting hand. My aunt touched my chin, lifted my head so that I was looking in her eyes. "Listen, Jake, this is important."

"Okay."

"Mrs. O'Leary says you'll pass and go on to junior high, but it's a close thing. And starting next year your grades will count toward college. Did you know that?"

"No, ma'am."

"Every member of my family for two generations has gone to college. I do not intend for that to change."

I said nothing. Her eyes were a sharp intense blue. Penetrating. So we were family, I thought. She said, "Ford thinks you might like to try out for baseball next year. Is that true?"

I had never considered the possibility. Now, turning the ball in my hand, I said, "I guess."

"I talked to the junior high baseball coach, too. You have to bring your grades up or you won't be eligible for the team. Can you do that?"

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"Yes, ma'am — it's not that I'm dumb or anything. It's just — " I paused, searching for words that would not come. How could I explain? "I don't know."

Aunt Rachel smiled. "But you'll do better, right?"

I nodded.

"Good." She smiled and reached out to squeeze my hand. I could feel the pressure of her fingers. I could feel the ball's seams dig into my palm. "Oh, that's fine, Jake. Have you ever played ball before?"

"No, ma'am," I said.

"Then you have some catching up to do. I think there's someone outside who'd like to help."

I stood and went to the window. Ford waited below, his shadow stretching across the grass. He wore a glove on his left hand, a baseball cap canted over his eyes. When he saw me, he lifted the glove and hollered, "Hey, Jake! Come on!"

I lifted my hand in a half-reluctant wave and just then Aunt Rachel stepped up behind me. She tugged a cap firmly over my head, and let her fingers fall to my shoulder. "Go ahead, have fun," she whispered. "But remember our deal."

"Yes, ma'am!" I shouted. Scooping up the bat, I ran out of the room. I bounded down the steps, through the kitchen, and into the sunlit backyard where Ford awaited me.

Ford pitched, and I batted.

The sun arced westward. Time and again, the Louisville Slugger whistled impotently in the air, until at last I threw it down in frustration.

"You're swinging wild," Ford said. "You're hacking at the ball."

He picked up the discarded bat, and swung it easily for a moment with his large and capable-looking hands.

"Like this," he told me. He planted his feet, and bounced a little on his knees. He held his elbows away from his body, tilted the bat over his shoulder, and swung smoothly and easily.

"Watch the ball," he said. "You've got to eye the ball in, and meet it smoothly. You want to try?"

I shrugged. Ford handed me the bat and took his position sixty feet away. I bobbed the bat, swung it once or twice the way I had seen the pros do, and

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relaxed into the stance Ford had shown me, the bat angled over my right shoulder. I tracked the ball as it left his hand, saw it hurtle towards me, but I held back, held back...

...and at the very last moment, just when it seemed the ball would whip by untouched, I swung.

I felt the concussion all along my shoulders and arms. My mouth fell open, and I tossed the bat into the grass, hooting in delight. Ford clapped his hands as the ball rocketed skyward, disappeared momentarily into the sun, and began to drop into the high grass beyond the yard.

Gone.

"Now we have to find it," Ford said.

I set off across the yard, jogging to keep up with Ford's long strides. My arms and shoulders ached pleasantly. I could taste a slight tang of perspiration on my upper lip. Half-curiously, I looked at the sim. Not a single droplet of sweat clung to his perfect, gleaming flesh. He walked smoothly, and easily, his knees humming with every step.

When we finally found the ball, far back in the field behind the house, I threw myself exhausted in the grass. Ford lowered himself beside me, propping his weight on his elbows, and we remained that way for a while, sucking thoughtfully on sweet blades of grass. An old game my father and I had played came back to me and I began to point out shapes in the clouds — a chariot, a skull, a moose — but the sim did not respond.

"Do you see anything?" I asked him, and when he did not answer I turned to eye him. "Well, do you?"

He chased the grass stalk to the far corner of his mouth and smiled. "Sure I do, when you point them out, Jake. You go ahead, I like to listen."

And so I did, until the charm of the game began to wear thin; after that we just lay quiet and restful for a while. At last, my aunt called me for supper. Inside, for the first time, the sim came into the kitchen and took a chair at the table while we ate. He shot me a glance as he sat down, as if I might have something to say about it, and I almost did. A quick flash of anger, like heat lightning, flickered through me. I looked away.

"Discipline," Ford told me that summer. "In baseball, discipline is everything."

That, too, was a legacy. And though I imagine Ford could not have known

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it — what could he really know, after all? — perhaps he sensed it somehow: this was a lesson with broader implications. Certainly Aunt Rachel knew it.

"For every hour you spend on baseball," she told me that night, "you must spend an hour reading or doing homework. Agreed?"

And so commenced my central obsessions, those legacies that have shaped my life. From that time onward, my youth was consumed by baseball and books. During that summer and the summers that followed — all through my high school career — Ford and I worked in the quiet isolation of the backyard. I took to baseball with a kind of innate facility, as if an understanding of the game had been encoded in my genes. I relished the sting of a line-drive into well-oiled leather, the inexorable trajectory of a flyball as it plummeted toward a waiting glove. I relish it still. There is an order and a symmetry to the game which counteracts the chaos that pervades our lives; even then, in some inchoate, inexpressible fashion, I understood this simple truth.

Every pitcher has to have a repertoire, Ford told me one day, a fast ball and a curve. Leaning over me, he shaped my fingers along the seams of the ball. Hide it in your glove, he said. Don't tip off the batter.

Summer after summer, until the season broke and winter closed around the town, Ford coached me through the pitch — the grips, the wind-up and pivot, the follow through on the release. I wanted to hurl with my arm. Save your arm, he told me; he showed me how to use my legs.

But it was more than merely physical discipline; Ford had a strategic grasp of the game, as well. He taught me that baseball was a cerebral sport, showed me that a well-coached team could prevail over talent and brawn. Some days we never touched a ball at all. We sat cross-legged in the grass, dissecting games we had heard on the radio or read about in the paper. He fabricated situations out of whole cloth and asked me to coach my way through them, probing my responses with emotionless logic.

Occasionally, in the frustration of the moment, I would stand and walk away from him, turning at last to gaze back to the far distant house, past the sim sitting patiently in the grass, to the back porch where my aunt waited, watching from the steps that first summer, and later, as the arthritis began to gnaw away inside her, from the hated prison of her powerchair.

In those later years, she preserved her dignity. On our infrequent excursions into town, she insisted on walking upright; she masked her pain

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and held her head rigidly erect, regal as a queen. She did not give up. Standing there in the open field, I would remember this, and her simple lesson, the litany she lived by, would come back to me: *You must never run away.* Chagrined, I would remember another thing that had been said to me — Ford's voice this time, saying, *Talent is never enough, Jake. Discipline is everything* — and I would walk back and take my place across from him.

Tell me again, I would say.

Tiny motors whirred beneath his flesh, drew a broad smile across his features; he would tell me again. Day after day, through the long summer months, he told me again. We hashed over countless situations, until the strategies came thoughtlessly to my lips, naturally, and I did not walk away in frustration anymore.

During these same years, I spent nights alone in my bedroom, studying during the school year, reading for pleasure in my stolen hours. At first, in a kind of half-conscious rebellion against my aunt's ultimatum, I read only about baseball — strategies and biographies, meditations on the game. But gradually my interests broadened. I read history and fiction and one memorable summer, everything I could find about simulated people. I read about Hiram Wallace and his absurd tragedy. I read his encomiums for the specialized sims he called grief counselors — and opposing editorials from every perspective. The resurrection man had been right about one thing: Wallace had his critics.

But none of them convinced me.

At the school library one fall I researched the matter. I flipped anxiously through news magazines, half-hoping to run upon a picture of the stout, hearty salesman that had come to the house, half-fearing it as well. That night, I lay awake far into the morning, examining in a magazine graphic the wondrous intricacies of Ford's design. I remember being half-afraid the sim would walk in upon me, as if I were doing something vaguely shameful, though why I should have felt this way, I cannot say. After that, during sleepless nights, in the darkness when the image of my father would not cohere, I thought of Ford: I imagined the twisted involutions of his construction, the gears and cogs and whirring motors, the thousand electric impulses that sang along his nested wires, far down through his core, to the crystal-matrixed genius of his brain.

* * *

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This is what I remember about high school:

Empty stands.

Not truly empty, you understand — the crowds came in droves by my senior year, when I won ten of eleven as a starter. By that time, a few local fellows, short on work, had even started looking in on practice. They lounged in the stands, trimming their nails or glancing through the want ads; every once in a while, if someone got a piece of the ball, they would holler and whistle.

And hundreds showed up for the last game of my high school career, when I gave up the winning run on a botched slider in the seventh. But the stands were empty all the same.

Afterward, I stood on the mound and watched the crowd disperse. A few teammates patted my shoulder as they headed in to see their families, but I just stood there in the middle of the diamond.

My aunt had never seen me play; she could barely leave the house by then. And Ford? Who would take him to the ballpark?

A JOWLY, RED-FACED man awaited me at school the following Monday. I had seen him in the stands during practice the last week or so, looking on with a kind of absent-minded regard, as if he had more important things on his mind. I assumed him an out-of-work gas jockey or a farmhand with time on his hands.

I was wrong.

He sat across from me in the cluttered office off the locker room, his beat-up oxfords propped carelessly on the corner of Coach Ryan's desk. He wore a shabby suit and a coffee-stained tie; his shirt gapped at the belly. Coach Ryan had introduced him as Gerald Haynes, a scout for the Reds.

"So what happened the other night?" Haynes asked.

I started to speak, but Coach Ryan interrupted. He fiddled with a pencil on his blotter. "Just an off game, Mr. Haynes — an off pitch, actually. The boy played a solid game." He looked at me as if he had just noticed I was there. "You played a solid game, Jake."

Haynes lifted an eyebrow. "What do *you* say, son?"

"I made a bad decision," I replied, when the silence had stretched a moment too long. "I went with the slider when the fastball had been working all day. It hung up on me." I shrugged.

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"Jake's got a pretty good slider, actually — " Coach Ryan began, but Haynes held up his hand.

He picked up a paper cup that sat on the floor and dribbled a stream of tobacco juice into it. I could smell the tobacco juice, intermixed with the locker room's familiar stink of mold and sweat. "Why would you make a decision like that, son?"

"I knew there were some college scouts in the stands. I wanted to show them what I had."

Haynes chuckled.

"I didn't know *you* were there," I said.

Coach Ryan said, "I didn't tell him. I didn't want to make him nervous, you know?"

"So you pitched to impress the people watching, am I right?"

My bowels felt loose, like I might be sick, but I met his eyes. "Yes, sir."

Haynes put the cup down and leaned close to me. I could smell his polluted breath. "You pitch to win, Jake. That's the cardinal rule, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"You aren't ready to throw sliders, and you certainly aren't ready to throw them on a three-two count in the last inning of a tied ballgame. You want to know about sliders, I'll tell you about sliders. A badly thrown slider can throw your arm out a whack for good, ruin your career. I've seen it once, I've seen it a thousand times."

"Yes, sir."

"You want to take care of yourself." Haynes leaned back and crossed his arms over his belly. He stared at me for a while.

I knew I shouldn't ask, but I couldn't help myself. "Why is that, sir?"

Haynes dug a clump of snuff from behind his lip and flipped it into the cup. He stood, wiped his hands on his pants, and extended his arm to me.

I reached out and took his grip. He squeezed hard and smiled. "I've seen better, son," he said. "But you ain't bad. You ain't bad."

Those were the days before ballplayers commanded the astronomical salaries they draw now, as Aunt Rachel quickly pointed out. "I'm entirely against it, Jake," she told me one evening early in July.

I sighed and shifted uncomfortably in one of the claw-footed chairs in the parlor. The Reds had, in fact, extended me an offer, but I had been chosen in

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the late rounds. My signing bonus was negligible, my proposed salary more so. *You've got talent, all right*, Haynes had told me, *but you ain't no ace, son.*

Not yet, I had thought.

Now, I glanced at Ford. He sat on the loveseat across the room, his back straight, his hands resting flat on his thighs. "Well, Ford," I said. "What do you think?"

The sim tilted his head with a faintly musical hum. He looked to my aunt and then back to me. "I don't know, Jake," he said at last. "I can't answer things like that."

"Well, wouldn't you like me to play pro ball?"

"Sure. I guess so."

"Don't you think he ought to go to college?" Aunt Rachel said drily.

"Yes, ma'am. I guess so."

I crossed my arms in exasperation and swung my legs over the arm of my chair. I managed to hold the pose for all of thirty seconds before my aunt's silent disapproval compelled me to lower my feet and sit up straight.

"Thank you," Aunt Rachel said. Then, after a brief silence, "Jake, you know that machine can't be a part of this."

I didn't answer.

"I only want what's best for you. You know that." She coughed weakly, grimacing, and straightened herself in the powerchair.

The doctor had told me she was in extraordinary pain, but it was easy to forget. She did not speak of her illness; she refused pain medication.

I felt awful. I wanted to apologize to her. But this was an opportunity that might never again present itself. I said, "College will wait. I can go to college anytime."

"Every member of my family for two generations has been to college."

"I didn't say I wouldn't go. I said it would wait."

My aunt guided her chair to the broad windows that overlooked the front. I could see the caddy out there, more broken-down than ever, and on the knoll at the end of the long drive, the stand of maple overlooking the valley. I wondered what she could be thinking—if, like me, she was remembering the day she had brought me to this place, this home, and how she had paused up there to look out over the house and the land and to let me look out over them for the first time, too. I wondered what it had cost her to take me in, what it might cost her yet.

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She said, "There are some things you should understand."

She did not turn around. I could see her gray hair, pulled into a loose bun, and the shawl she had taken to wearing across her shoulders even in July.

"Yes, ma'am?" I sought her eyes in the window, but her reflection shimmered, liquescent in the failing light.

She turned the chair and I cut my eyes to the sim, but he didn't say a word. He merely sat there, implacable and still, inhumanly so, watching.

My aunt cleared her throat. "Your father didn't leave much for you. He was a young man and hadn't much to leave. I don't have much either." She chuckled humorlessly. "I am an old woman, and I am sick. The doctors will have what remains to me. You understand?"

"But I can help. I can send you money. Some ballplayers make great money, more money than you can even imag — "

She held up her hand. "Not in the minors, Jake. What will you do if you injure yourself?"

"I can go to school if that happens."

"But how will you pay for it?"

I glanced at Ford, but the sim was quiet.

My aunt said, "Right now you have scholarship offers from three schools. If you injure yourself so you can't play ball that won't be true."

"And if I injure myself playing ball in school, I'll never play in the majors."

"In that case you'll have something to fall back on."

Again, there was silence. I stared at her resentfully for a moment, and then I looked away. I studied the faded floral pattern on the rug and nagged at my lower lip with my teeth.

Aunt Rachel said, "It's decided, then?"

Before I could think, the words were out: "Nothing's decided. I'm eighteen. I can do what I want."

My aunt drew her eyebrows together. "Of course, that's true. If that's the way you feel, you'll do whatever you wish." She touched a button on her powerchair, wheeled around, and zoomed out of the room.

"Christ."

I stood, walked through the dining room to the kitchen, and went outside. The sky had begun to grow dark, stippled with the first incandescent points of stars. Somewhere, I knew, players were taking the diamond,

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uniforms shining in the glare of banked floodlights. I could almost hear the good-natured give and take of the infield chatter, the mercurial chorus of the fans.

Dry grass crackled behind me, and turning, I saw Ford, one half of his face limned yellow in the light from the house. Up close, he smelled of machine oil and rubber, stretched taut over burnished steel.

"Are you okay?"

I stared away into the memory-haunted yard. Here, here was the place where it had begun, my passion for the game. Here, where we had so often thrown the ball around, honing my skills until I could send the ball sizzling over the plate in a single smooth motion, like a dancer.

"I shouldn't have said that about doing whatever I want."

The sim stood beside me. A breeze came up, leavening the night heat. "What are you going to do?" Ford asked.

"I don't know. Go to school, I guess."

"I see."

We were silent for a few moments, watching fireflies stencil glowing trails through the darkness. I said, "When I'm away, I'll miss you."

Ford cocked his head, something humming in his neck.

I said, "You'll take good care of her?"

"I will."

I raised a hand to the machine's shoulder and squeezed once, softly. I started back to the house. When I was halfway there, Ford said, "I'll miss you, too, Jake."

Smiling in the darkness, I said, "Thanks," and then I turned and went up the stairs and into the kitchen. I lay in my darkened bedroom for a long while before I heard the whine of the screen door and the sound of the sim coming into the house below.

The last time I saw the house in Stowes Corners, I was a senior in college. I have not been back since.

But the moment lingers in my mind, as timeless as the day my father was buried and Ford came to me in the humid stillness of a Missouri noon. Once again, I am reminded of the archaeologist, his search for the seams between the strata of the buried cities, built pell-mell one atop the rubble of another. This, too, is such a moment — a seam between the boy I had been, the man I would become:

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* * *

I was twenty-three, informed by a grief pervasive in its devastation. My aunt had died two nights previous. A major stroke. Merciful, her doctor had called it. Painless. But how could he have known?

Three of us gathered that afternoon — the minister; a probate lawyer named Holdstock; myself. I had blown two week's work-study salary on the flowers which stood in ranks about the open grave, exuding a heady, cheerful perfume that seemed blasphemous. The sun printed the shadows of the tombstones across the grass, and the awning above us snapped in the breeze as the minister closed his book.

Once again, I crumbled dry earth between my fingers. I listened as it trickled against the coffin. Nothing changes.

I shook hands with the minister, walked the lawyer to his Lincoln.

"Everything's taken care of?" I asked.

Holdstock smiled at the question, asked twice in as many hours. "The auction's set for two weeks tomorrow. I'll be in touch."

We shook hands, and he opened his car door. He turned to look at me, and an odd expression — half embarrassment, half determination — passed over his face. He tugged nervously at the lapels of his dark jacket.

I knew what was coming.

"Listen," he said. "My boy's a big fan. He loves Tiger baseball. I was wondering, could I — " He held a pad in his hand.

"Sure." He fished a pen out of his coat, and I scrawled my name on the page.

"My boy has lots of autographs," he said. "We usually head down St. Louis for opening day and — " He shook his head. "Aw hell, I'm sorry."

He held out his hand again, said, "Best of luck, Jake," and shut the door. The Lincoln pulled away. A drop of perspiration slid between my shoulder blades. I shrugged off my jacket, slung it over my shoulder, and surveyed the cemetery. Everything was still. Yellow earth-moving machinery waited behind a screen of trees; I was delaying the inevitable.

I got in my car and drove away from the town, into a region of summer-painted hills. The house was to be sold, the furnishings auctioned. Medical expenses had taken everything, just as Aunt Rachel had predicted. I'd made a list for Holdstock; the few things I wished to keep had been delivered to the hotel. For reasons I had avoided analyzing, I couldn't bring myself to stay at the house.

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Now, however, the funeral behind me, those reasons lingered like uneasy specters in my mind. *You must never run away from the truth,* Aunt Rachel had told me. *Once you begin running, you can never stop.*

Before I had gone twenty-five miles, I cursed and pulled to the side of the road. With a kind of nauseating dread, I swung the car back toward town. There was unfinished business.

A realtor's sign stood at the head of the long drive, but when I emerged from the maples and paused atop the hill, I saw that everything was the same. It seemed as if no time at all had passed. I might have been a boy again. Steeling myself, I touched the gas and started down.

The locks had been freshly oiled, and my key sent the tumblers silently home. As I stepped inside, something whirred at my feet; an automaid sped around the corner, treads blurring. Bulky and low, it looked curiously antiquated; the newer models were sleek, silent, somehow disquieting.

I closed the door. Afternoon sunlight slanted through half-closed blinds. The hardwood shone with a merciless gloss, but everything else seemed faded. The floral-patterned rugs had been drained of color, and pale sheets glimmered over furniture ear-marked for auction. I could smell the musty odor of stale air and enclosed spaces, and the lemony ghost of my aunt's furniture polish, somehow disconcerting. It was a house where no one lived anymore.

I found Ford upstairs in my old bedroom. He sat rigidly in the chair by the window, his broad unlined hands flat against his thighs. He looked just the same.

"I wondered if you would come," he said.

I examined the dim room, lit only by an exterior glare cleft into radiant shards by the blinds. An old Orioles pennant dangled from one tack on the far wall, but the room was otherwise devoid of personality. The photo albums where I'd kept my baseball cards were gone, stored now in the shelf over my desk in Columbia. Gone too were the photographs — my aunt, my father, my mother. They stood now on the end tables in my apartment. Nothing remained.

"I've been reading about you in the papers," Ford said.

"I'm the big news, I guess," I said.

"Do you have a contract yet?"

"Soon. We're negotiating." I shrugged.

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The sim didn't say anything, so I crossed the room and lifted the blind and gazed into the backyard for a moment. A bird chirped in the eaves.

"When do you graduate?"

"August." I laughed. "She couldn't hang on to see it, you know."

"I'm sure she would have liked to."

"Wouldn't have mattered anyway, I suppose. I'll be on the road in rookie league by August."

"And then?"

"Who knows? I saw Haynes recently. Remember him? He said, 'You ain't an ace yet, son, but you're getting better.' I plan to make it."

"So the old dream is coming true," Ford said.

"I guess. We'll see."

I sat on the denuded mattress. In here, in the room where I had been a boy, the years seemed to have fallen away. I felt as fractured and alone as when I had been twelve years old, as much a stranger to this room and house. I could not help but recall the day the resurrection man had come, could not help but remember his dark suit and garish tie, his unpleasant stink of after-shave and tobacco. *It isn't right that a boy grow up without a man in the house,* Aunt Rachel had said, and now, remembering this I felt ice slide through my veins.

So this is what it all had come to.

I said, "I wanted to thank you. You've done everything for me."

"It's nothing," the sim said. "I understand."

We sat for a moment. Outside, the bird whistled merrily, as if it was the first bird, this the first day.

Ford turned to look at me, his neck swiveling with a hum so slight you could miss it if you weren't paying attention. He smiled, and I could hear tiny flywheels whir inside of him, and it all came back to me. Everything. The long days in the backyard, and Ford's strong hands gentle on my own, curving my fingers along the seams of the ball. The nights alone, here in this very room, when the darkness seemed to whirl and I could not remember my father's face. Ford — his vast intricacies, the thousand complicated mechanisms of his being — Ford had filled the void.

Ford said, "I didn't know about this part. I knew so much. They filled me up with so much knowledge about baseball and King Arthur and pirates and wars — all the things a boy might conceivably wish to know or learn. But they left this part out. I wonder if they knew?"

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And then, for the first time, I thought of legacies. And though I did not say it, I thought: They didn't know. How could they?

But all I said was, "Nobody told me either."

I looked straight into his eyes, just as my aunt had taught me. "I'll be on the road a lot," I said, "there's nothing I can do. I'm sorry."

The sim smiled and bowed his head. The coarse hair at the base of his neck had neither grown nor been cut. It was the same color it had been always. And when he lifted a thick sheaf of it away, I saw what I knew I would see, what I had seen once before: a colored switch, like a tiny gem. The sunlight fell against it, and shattered into myriad colored fragments along the walls of the room.

Show me. I want to know, I had said all those years ago, and he had shown me, and I had seen that he was not my father, not even a man, but just a machine. A machine.

I reached out to the switch, touched it with trembling fingers, tensed to throw it home —

And if I do? I had asked him once.

Gone, he had told me. *Erased and irrecoverable. Everything that makes me me.*

Ford said, "We had some times, Jake."

"We had some times, Ford," I replied. "That's for sure."

And then I cut him off.

I REMEMBER IT all. I remember the room as I saw it last, barren of everything that had made it mine. I remember Ford, slumped in the wooden chair, another lost possession — just furniture, awaiting auction. I turned away and walked down the stairs and through the foyer to the porch. I stood there for a long time, my eyes watering in the afternoon glare, and then I walked to the car and drove away.

I didn't look back.

But every day is a backwards glance. When I take the mound, I feel his fingers around my fingers, showing me the grips. And when I'm up by one in the ninth and the tying run is on third, it is his voice that I hear in my head.

I live in a fine house now, with my wife and son, and I play in Memorial

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Stadium more frequently than I might ever have hoped. My family attends every game.

But I have a recurrent dream.

In the dream, I stand on the mound, clutching a baseball and staring across the grass to the batter. The crowd is wild. If I look to the stands I can see them by the thousands, venting as one a full-throated roar. And with that enhanced acuity that comes to us in dreams, I see all the dead who are lost to me, scattered among the throng. The mother I could not know, the father I can barely remember. Aunt Rachel. Ford. The resurrection man, who unknowing shaped my destiny, and left for me this legacy, its blessing and its curse.

The game rides on a single pitch. The bases are loaded, one out remains in the final inning, the count stands at three and two. I have to throw a strike.

But even as the pitch leaves my outstretched fingers, I know that it is poorly thrown. A slider, it hangs up on me, seeming almost to float. The batter steps close, shoulders tensing with the pressure as he delays the swing, and then, in the final moment before the ball is over the bag, he whips the bat around in a single blurring motion.

You can hear the impact all over the park.

The ball leaps skyward. The crowd noise surges to a crescendo, and holds there momentarily, battering, contusive. And then, all at once, it is gone.

Silence fills the stadium.

I wheel around to track the progress of the ball, a diminishing speck as it climbs higher, still higher. I watch as it begins its long descent through the quiet air, plunging toward the second deck. And that is when I notice: my mother and father, Aunt Rachel and Ford, the resurrection man himself — gone, all of them, gone. As far as I can see, the empty stands, the endless empty rows.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE FAR FUTURE

LITTLE science fiction deals with truly grand perspectives in time. Most stories and novels envision people much like ourselves, immersed in cultures that quite resemble ours, and inhabiting worlds which are foreseeable extensions of the places we now know.

Such landscapes are, of course, easier to envision, more comfortable to the reader, and simpler for the writer; one can simply mention everyday objects and let them set the interior stage of the reader's mind.

Yet some of our field's greatest works concern vast perspectives. Most of Olaf Stapledon's novels (*Star Maker, Last And First Men*) are set against such immense backdrops. Arthur C. Clarke's *Against the Fall of Night* opens over a billion years in our future. These works have remained in print many decades, partly because they are rare attempts to "look long"—to see ourselves against the scale of evolution itself.

Indeed, H.G. Wells wrote *The Time Machine* in part as a reaction to the Darwinian ideas which had swept the intellectual world of comfortable England. He conflated evolution with a Marxist imagery of racial class separation, notions that could only play out on the scale of millions of years. His doomed crab scuttling on a reddened beach was the first great image of the far future.

Similarly, Stapledon and Clarke wrote in the dawn of modern cosmology, shortly after Hubble's discovery of universal expansion implied a startlingly large age of the universe. Cosmologists believed this to be about two billion years then. From better measurements, we now think it to be at least five times that. In any case, it was so enormous a time that pretensions of human

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importance seemed grotesque. We have been around less than a thousandth of the universe's age. Much has gone before us, and even more will follow.

In recent decades there have been conspicuously few attempts to approach such perspectives in literature. This is curious, for such dimensions afford sweeping vistas, genuine awe. Probably most writers find the severe demands too daunting. One must understand biological evolution, the physical sciences, and much else — all the while shaping a moving human story, which may not even involve humans as we now know them. Yet there is a continuing audience for such towering perspectives.

"Thinking long" means "thinking big." Fiction typically focuses on the local and personal, gaining its power by unities of time and setting. Fashioning intense stories against huge backdrops is difficult. And humans are special and idiosyncratic, while the sweep of time is broad, general and uncaring.

We are tied to time, immense stretches of it. Our DNA differs from that of chimps by only 1.6 percent; we lords of creation are but a hair's breadth from the jungle. We are the third variety of chimp, and a zoologist from Alpha Centauri would classify us without hesitation along with the common chimp of tropical Africa and the pygmy chimp of Zaire. Most of that 1.6 percent may well be junk, too, of no genetic importance, so the significant differences are even smaller.

We carry genetic baggage from far back in lost time. We diverged genetically from the Old World monkeys about 30 million years ago, from gorillas about ten million years ago, and from the other chimps about seven million years ago. Only 40 thousand years ago did *we* wondrous creatures appear — meaning our present form, which differs in shape and style greatly from our ancestor Neanderthals. We roved further, made finer tools, and when we moved into Neanderthal territory, the outcome was clear; within a short while, no more Neanderthals.

No other large animal is native to all continents and breeds in all habitats, from rainforests to deserts to the poles. Among our unique abilities which we proudly believe led to our success, we seldom credit our propensity to kill each other, and to destroy our environment — yet there are evolutionary arguments that these were valuable to us once, leading to pruning of our genes and ready use of resources.

These same traits now threaten our existence. They also imply that,

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if we last into the far future, those deep elements in us will make for high drama, rueful laughter, triumph and tragedy.

While we have surely been shaped by our environment, our escape from bondage to our natural world is the great theme of civilization. How will this play out on the immense scale of many millennia? The environment will surely change, both locally on the surface of the Earth, and among the heavens. We shall change with it.

We shall probably meet competition from other worlds, and may fall from competition to a Darwinian doom. We could erect immense empires and play Godlike games with vast populations. And surely we could tinker with the universe in ingenious ways, the inquisitive chimpanzee wrestling whole worlds to suit his desires. Once we gain great powers, we can confront challenges undreamed of by Darwin. The universe as a whole is our ultimate opponent.

In the very long run, the astrologers may turn out to be right: our fates may be determined by the stars. For they are doomed.

Stars are immense reservoirs of energy, dissipating their energy stores into light as quickly as their bulk allows. Our own star is 4.3 billion years old, almost halfway through its eleven billion year life span. After that, it shall begin to burn heavier and heavier elements at its core, growing hotter. Its atmospheric envelope of already incandescent gas shall heat and swell. From a mild-mannered, yellow-white star it shall bloat into a reddened giant, swallowing first Mercury, then Venus, then Earth and perhaps Mars.

H.G. Wells foresaw in *The Time Machine* a dim sun, with a giant crablike thing scuttling across a barren beach. While evocative, this isn't what astrophysics now tells us. But as imagery, it remains a striking reflection upon the deep problem that the far future holds — the eventual meaning of human action.

About 4.5 billion years from now, our sun will rage a hundred times brighter. Half a billion years further on, it will be between 500 and a thousand times more luminous, and seventy percent larger in radius. The Earth's temperature depends only slowly on the sun's luminosity (varying as the one fourth root), so by then our crust will roast at about 1400 degrees Kelvin; room temperature is 300 Kelvin. The oceans and air will have boiled away, leaving barren plains beneath an angry sun which covers thirty-five degrees of the sky.

What might humanity — however transformed by natural selec-

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tion, or by its own hand — do to save itself? Sitting further from the fire might work. Temperature drops inversely with the square of distance, so Jupiter will be cooler by a factor of 2.3, Saturn by 3.1. But for a sun 500 times more luminous than now, the Jovian moons will still be 600 degrees Kelvin (K), and Saturn's about 450 K. Uranus might work, 4.4 times cooler, a warm but reasonable 320 K. Neptune will be a brisk 255 K. What strange lives could transpire in the warmed, deep atmospheres of those gas giants?

Still, such havens will not last. When the sun begins helium burning in earnest it will fall in luminosity, and Uranus will become a chilly 200 K. Moving inward to Saturn would work, for it will then be at 300 K, balmy shirtsleeve weather — if we have arms by then.

The bumpy slide downhill for our star will see the sun's luminosity fall to merely a hundred times the present value, when helium burning begins, and the Earth will simmer at 900 K. After another fifty million years — how loftily astrophysicists can toss off these immensities! — as further reactions alter in the sun's core, it will swell into a red giant again. It will blow off its outer layers, unmasking the dense, brilliant core that will evolve into a white dwarf. Earth will be seared by the torrent of escaping gas, and bathed in piercing ultraviolet light. The white-hot core will then cool slowly.

As the sun eventually simmers down, it will sink to a hundredth of its present luminosity. Then even Mercury will be a frigid 160 K, and Earth will be a frozen corpse at 100 K. The solar system, once a grand stage, will be a black relic beside a guttering campfire.

To avoid this fate, intelligent life can tinker — at least for a while — with stellar burning. Our star will get into trouble because it will eventually pollute its core with the heavier elements that come from burning hydrogen. In a complex cycle, hydrogen fuses and leaves assorted helium, lithium, carbon and other elements. With all its hydrogen burned up at its core, where pressures and temperatures are highest, the sun will begin fusing helium. This takes higher temperatures, which the star attains by compressing under gravity. Soon the helium runs out. The next heavier element fuses. Carbon burns until the star enters a complex, unstable regime leading to swelling. (For other stars than ours, there could even be explosions (supernovas) if its mass is great enough.)

To stave off this fate, a cosmic engineer need only note that at least

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ninety percent of the hydrogen in the star is still unburned, when the cycle turns in desperation to fusing helium. The star's oven lies at the core, and hydrogen is too light to sink down into it.

Envision a great spoon which can stir the elements in a star, mixing hydrogen into the nuclear ash at the core. The star could then return to its calmer, hydrogen-fusing reaction.

No spoon of matter could possibly survive the immense temperatures there, of course. But magnetic fields can move mass through their rubbery pressures. The sun's surface displays this, with its magnetic arches and loops which stretch for thousands of kilometers, tightly clasping hot plasma into tubes and strands.

If a huge magnetic paddle could reach down into the sun's core and stir it, the solar life span could extend to perhaps a hundred billion years. To do this requires immense currents, circulating over coils larger than the sun itself.

What "wires" could support such currents, and what battery would drive them? Such cosmic engineering is beyond our practical comprehension, but it violates no physical laws. Perhaps, with five billion years to plan, we can figure a way to do it. In return, we would extend the lifetime of our planet tenfold.

To fully use this extended stellar lifetime, we would need strategies for capturing more sunlight than a planet can. Freeman Dyson envisioned breaking up worlds into small asteroids, each orbiting its star in a shell of many billions of small worldlets. These could in principle capture nearly all the sunlight. We could conceivably do this to the Earth, then the rest of the planets.

Of course, the environmental impact report for such engineering would be rather hefty. This raises the entire problem of what happens to the Earth while all these stellar agonies go on. Even if we insure a mild, sunny climate, there are long term troubles with our atmosphere.

Current thinking holds that the big, long term problem we face is loss of carbon dioxide from our air. This gas, the food of the plants, gets locked up in rocks. Photosynthetic organisms down at the very base of the food chain extract carbon from air, cutting the life chain.

We might fix this by bioengineering organisms that return carbon dioxide. Then we would need to worry about the slow brightening of our sun, which would make our surface temperature about 80 degrees Centigrade in 1.5 billion years. Compensating for this by increasing our cloud cover, say, would work for a

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while. A cooling cloud blanket will work for a while. Still, we continually lose hydrogen to space, evaporated away at the top of the atmosphere. Putting water clouds up to block the sunlight means that they, too, will get boiled away. Even with such measures, liquid water on Earth would evaporate in about 2.5 billion years from now. Without oceans, volcanoes would be the major source for new atmospheric elements, and we would evolve a climate much like that of Venus.

All this assumes that we don't find wholly new ways of getting around planetary problems. I suspect that we crafty chimpanzees probably shall, though. We like to tinker and we like to roam. Though some will stay to fiddle with the Earth, the sun and the planets, some will move elsewhere.

After all, smaller stars will live longer. The class called M dwarfs, dim and red and numerous, can burn steady and wan, for up to a hundred billion years, without any assistance. Then even they will gutter out. Planets around such stars will have a hard time supporting life, because any world close enough to the star to stay warm will also be tide locked, one side baked and the other freezing. Still, they might prove temporary abodes for wandering primates, or for others.

Eventually, no matter what stellar engine we harness, all the hydrogen gets burned. Similar pollution problems beset even the artificially aged star, now completely starved of hydrogen. It seethes, grows hotter, sears its planets, then swallows them.

There may be other adroit dodges available to advanced lifeforms, such as using the energy of supernovas. These are brute mechanisms, and later exploding stars can replenish the interstellar clouds of dust and gas, so that new stars can form — but not many. On average, matter gets recycled in about four billion years in our galaxy. Our own planet's mass is partly recycled stellar debris from the first galactic supernova generation. This cycle can go on until about 20 billion years pass, when only a ten-thousandth of the interstellar medium will remain. Dim red stars will glow in the spiral arms, but the great dust banks will have been trapped into stellar corpses.

So unavoidably, the stars are as mortal as we. They take longer, but they die.

For its first fifty billion years, the universe will brim with light. Gas and dust will still fold into fresh suns. For an equal span the stars would linger. Beside reddening suns, planetary life will warm itself by the waning fires that herald stellar death.

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Sheltering closer and closer to stellar warmth, life could take apart whole solar systems, galaxies, even the entire Virgo cluster of galaxies, all to capture light. In the long run, life must take everything apart and use it, to survive.

To ponder futures beyond that era, we must discuss the universe as a whole.

Modern cosmology is quite different from the physics of the Newtonian worldview, which dreamed uneasily of a universe that extended forever but was always threatened by collapse. Nothing countered the drawing-in of gravity except infinity itself. Though angular momentum will keep a galaxy going for a great while, collisions can cancel that. Objects hit each other and mutually plunge toward the gravitating center. Physicists of the Newtonian era thought that maybe there simply had not been enough time to bring about the final implosion. Newton, troubled by this, avoided cosmological issues.

Given enough time, matter will seek its own kind, stars smacking into each other, making greater and greater stars. This will go on even after the stars gutter out.

When a body meets a body, coming through the sky... Stars will inevitably collide, meet, merge. All the wisdom and order of planets and suns will finally compress into the marriage of many stars, plunging down the pit of gravity to become black holes. For the final fate of nearly all matter shall be the dark pyre of collapse.

Galaxies are as mortal as stars. In the sluggish slide of time, the spirals which had once gleamed with fresh brilliance will be devoured by ever-growing black holes. Inky masses will blot out whole spiral arms of dim red. The already massive holes at galactic centers will swell from their billion-stellar-mass sizes at present, to chew outward, gnawing without end.

From the corpses of stars, collisions will form either neutron stars or black holes, within about a thousand billion years (in exponential notation, 10^{12} years). Even the later and longest-lived stars cannot last beyond 10^{14} years. Collisions between stars will strip away all planets in 10^{15} years.

Blunt thermodynamics will still command, always seeking maximum disorder. In 10^{17} years, the last white dwarf stars will have cooled to be utterly black dwarfs, temperatures about 5 degrees Kelvin (Absolute). In time, even hell would freeze over.

Against an utterly black sky, shadowy cinders of stars will glide.

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Planets, their atmospheres frozen out into waveless lakes of oxygen, will glide in meaningless orbits, warmed by no ruby star glow. The universal clock would run down to the last tick of time.

But the universe is no static lattice of stars. It grows. The Big Bang would be better termed the Enormous Emergence, space-time snapping into existence intact and whole, of a piece. Then it grew, the fabric of space lengthening as time increased.

With the birth of space-time came its warping by matter, each wedded to the other until time eternal. An expanding universe cools, just as a gas does. The far future will freeze, even if somehow life manages to find fresh sources of power.

Could the expansion ever reverse? This is the crucial unanswered riddle in cosmology. If there is enough matter in our universe, eventually gravitation will win out over the expansion. The "dark matter" thought to infest the relatively rare, luminous stars we see could be dense enough to stop the universe's stretching of its own space-time. This density is related to how old the universe is.

We believe the universe is somewhere between 8 and 16 billion years old. The observed rate of expansion (the Hubble constant) gives 8 billion, in a simple, plausible model. The measured age of the oldest stars gives 16 billion.

This difference I believe arises from our crude knowledge of how to fit our mathematics to our cosmological data; I don't think it's a serious problem. Personally I favor the higher end of the range, perhaps 12 to 14 billion. We also have rough measures of the deceleration rate of the universal expansion. These can give (depending on cosmological, mathematical models) estimates of how long a dense universe would take to expand, reverse, and collapse back to a point. At the extremes, this gives between 27 billion and at least 100 billion years before the Big Crunch. If we do indeed live in a universe which will collapse, then we are bounded by two singularities, at beginning and end. No structure will survive that future singularity. Freeman Dyson found this a pessimistic scenario and so refused to consider it.

A closed universe seems the ultimate doom. In all cosmological models, if the mass density of the universe exceeds the critical value, gravity inevitably wins. This is called a "closed" universe, because it has finite spatial volume, but no boundary. It is like a three dimensional analog of a sphere's surface. A bug on a ball can circumnavigate it, explor-

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ing all its surface and coming back to home, having crossed no barrier. So a starship could cruise around the universe and come home, having found no edge.

A closed universe starts with a big bang (an initial singularity) and expands. Separation between galaxies grows linearly with time. Eventually the universal expansion of space-time will slow to a halt. Then a contraction will begin, accelerating as it goes, pressing galaxies closer together. The photons rattling around in this universe will increase in frequency, the opposite of the red shift we see now. Their blue shift means the sky gets brighter in time. Contraction of space-time shortens wavelengths, which increases light energy.

Though stars will still age and die as the closed universe contracts, the background light will blue shift. No matter if life burrows into deep caverns, in time the heat of this light will fry it. Freeman Dyson remarked that the closed universe gave him "a feeling of claustrophobia, to imagine our whole existence confined within a box." He asked, "Is it conceivable that by intelligent intervention, converting matter into radiation to flow purposefully on a cosmic scale, we could break open a closed universe and change the topology of spacetime so that only a part of it would collapse and another would expand forever? I do not know the answer to this question."

The answer seems to be that once collapse begins, a deterministic universe allows no escape for pockets of spacetime. Life cannot stop the squeezing.

Some have embraced this searing death, when all implodes toward a point of infinite temperature. Frank Tipler of Tulane University sees it as a great opportunity. In those last seconds, collapse will not occur at the same rate in all directions. Chaos in the system will produce "gravitational shear" which drives temperature differences. Drawing between these temperature differences, life can harness power for its own use.

Of course, such life will have to change its form to use such potentials; they will need hardier stuff than blood and bone. Ceramic-based forms could endure, or vibrant, self-contained plasma clouds — any tougher structure might work, as long as it can code information.

This most basic definition of life, the ability to retain and manipulate information, means that the substrate supporting this does not matter, in the end. Of course, the *style* of thought of a silicon web feasting on the slopes of a volcano won't be that of a shrewd

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primate fresh from the veldt, but certain common patterns can transfer.

Such life forms might be able to harness the compressive, final energies at that distant end, the Omega Point. Frank Tipler's *The Physics of Immortality* makes a case that a universal intelligence at the Omega Point will then confer a sort of immortality, by carrying out the computer simulation of all possible past intelligences. All possible earlier "people" will be resurrected, he thinks. This bizarre notion shows how cosmology blends into eschatology, the study of the ultimate fate of things, particularly of souls.

I, too, find this scenario of final catastrophe daunting. Suppose, then, the universe is not so dense that it will ever reverse its expansion. Then we can foresee a long, toiling twilight.

Life based on solid matter will struggle to survive. To find energy, it will have to ride herd on and merge black holes themselves, force them to emit bursts of gravitational waves. In principle these waves can be harnessed, though of course we don't know how as yet. Only such fusions could yield fresh energy in a slumbering universe.

High civilizations will rise, no doubt, mounted on the carcass of matter itself — the ever-spreading legions of black holes. Entire galaxies will turn from reddening lanes of stars, into swarms of utterly dark gravitational singularities, the holes. Only by moving such masses, by extracting power through magnetic forces and the slow gyre of dissipating orbits, could life rule the dwindling resources of the ever-enlarging universe. Staying warm shall become the one great Law.

Dyson has argued that in principle, the perceived time available to living forms can be made infinite. In this sense, immortality of a kind could mark the cold, stretching stages of the universal death.

This assumes that we know all the significant physics, of course. Almost certainly, we do not. Our chimpanzee worldview may simply be unable to comprehend events on such vast time scales. Equally, though, chimpanzees will try, and keep trying.

Since Dyson's pioneering work on these issues, yet more physics has emerged which we must take into account. About his vision of a swelling universe, its life force spent, hangs a great melancholy.

For matter itself is doomed, as well. Even the fraction which escapes the holes, and learns to use them, is mortal. Its basic building block, the proton, decays. This takes

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unimaginably long — current measurements suggest a proton lifetime of more than 10^{33} years. But decay seems inevitable, the executioner's sword descending with languid grace.

Even so, something still survives. Not all matter dies, though with the proton gone everything we hold dear will disintegrate, atoms and animals alike. After the grand operas of mass and energy have played out their plots, the universal stage will clear to reveal the very smallest.

The tiniest of particles — the electron and its anti-particle, the positron — shall live on, current theory suggests. No process of decay can find purchase on their infinitesimal scales, lever them apart into smaller fragments. The electron shall dance with its anti-twin in swarms: the lightest of all possible plasmas.

By the time these are the sole players, the stage will have grown enormously. Each particle will find its nearest neighbor to be a full light-year away. They will have to bind together, sharing cooperatively, storing data in infinitesimally thin currents and charges. A single entity would have to be the size of a spiral arm, of a whole galaxy. Vaster than empires, and more slow.

Plasmas held together by magnetic and electric fields are incredibly difficult to manage, rather like building a cage for jello out of rubber bands. But in principle, physics allows such magnetic loops and glowing spheres. We can see them in the short-lived phenomenon of ball lightning. More spectacularly, they occur on the sun, in glowing magnetic arches which can endure for weeks, a thousand kilometers high.

Intelligence could conceivably dwell in such wispy magnetic consorts. Communication will take centuries...but to the slow thumping of the universal heart, that will be nothing.

If life born to brute matter can find a way to incorporate itself into the electron-positron plasma, then it can last forever. This would be the last step in a migration from the very early forms, like us: rickety assemblies of water in tiny compartment cells, hung on a lattice of moving calcium rods.

Life and intelligence will have to alter, remaking their basic structures from organic molecules to, say, animated crystalline sheets. Something like this may have happened before; some theorists believe Earthly life began in wet clay beds, and moved to organic molecules in a soupy sea only later.

While the customary view of evolution does not speak of progress, there has been generally an increase

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of information transmitted forward to the next generation. Complexity increases in a given genus, order, class, etc. Once intelligence appears, or invades a wholly different medium, such "cognitive creatures" can direct their own evolution. Patterns will persist, even thrive, independent of the substrate.

So perhaps this is the final answer to the significance of it all. In principle, life and structure, hopes and dreams and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, can persist forever—if life chooses to, and struggles. In that far future, dark beyond measure, plasma entities of immense size and torpid pace may drift through a supremely strange era, sure and serene, free at last of ancient enemies.

Neither the thermodynamic dread of heat death nor gravity's gullet could then swallow them. Cosmology would have done its work.

As the universe swells, energy lessens, and the plasma life need only slow its pace to match. Mathematically, there are difficulties involved in arguing, as Dyson does, that the perceived span of order can be made infinite. The issue hinges on how information and energy scale with time. Assuming that Dyson's scaling is right, there is hope.

By adjusting itself exactly to its ever-cooling environment, life—of a sort — can persist and dream fresh dreams. The Second Law of Thermodynamics says that disorder increases in every energy transaction. But the Second Law need not be not the Final Law.

Such eerie descendants will have much to think about. They will be able to remember and relive in sharp detail the glory of the brief Early Time — that distant, legendary era when matter brewed energy from crushing suns together. When all space was furiously hot, overflowing with boundless energy. When life dwelled in solid states, breathed in chilly atoms, and mere paltry planets formed a stage.

Freeman Dyson once remarked to me, about these issues, that he felt the best possible universe was one of constant challenge. He preferred a future which made survival possible but not easy. We chimps, if coddled, get lazy and then stupid.

The true far future is shrouded and mysterious. Still, I expect that he shall get his wish, and we shall not be bored.

Comments (and objections!) to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford @uci.edu.

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It has been twenty-four years to the month since Roger Zelazny last graced our pages. Since then he has won four Hugo awards, two Nebula awards, and the Prix Apollo. He has published over fifty books. The most recent is Wilderness *which he wrote with Gerald Hausman, and which was published by Tor/Forge in hardcover last year. About this story, he writes, "'The Three Descents of Jeremy Baker' used theoretical concepts in physics recently put forth by respectable physicists. I thought it would be fun to try to combine them all into one story."*

The Three Descents of Jeremy Baker

By Roger Zelazny

I.

JEREMY BAKER WAS THE only survivor when the *Raven*'s Warton-Purg drive delivered the vessel to the vicinity of a black hole. Its tidal forces immediately did their stuff. The hull groaned and cracked as indicators screamed the ship's situation and listed its problems. Jeremy, who had been somewhat bored, had been in the possibly enviable position of testing his powerful extravehicular survival suit at the time of the disaster. He had on everything but the helmet, which he promptly donned. Then he hurried to the control station with the intention of activating the Warton-Purg drive again in hopes of fleeing through extracurricular space — though under the circumstances it was more likely to cause the *Raven* to explode. But then the *Raven* was exploding anyway and it was worth a shot.

He never made it.

The vessel came apart about him. He thought he glimpsed the jumpsuited figure of one of his crewmates spinning amid the debris, but he could not be certain.

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Suddenly, he was alone. Pieces of the *Raven* drifted away from him. He took a sip of the suit's water, wondering when he would feel a great heaviness in his feet as they were drawn down the gravity well faster than the rest of him — or perhaps it would be his head. He was uncertain as to his orientation. Still half in shock, he scanned the sky, peering into a star-occluding blackness. There. It would be his right arm where the stretching would begin. At least it would be an interesting way to die, he reflected. Not too many people had gotten to try it, though there had been a lot of colorful speculation.

He seemed to drift for a long while, musing on final splendors, without detecting any unusual sensations other than occasionally glimpsing what seemed a small, local patch of flickering light. He could not be certain as to its source. After a time, he felt an uncontrollable drowsiness and he slept.

"That's better," a voice seemed to be saying to him a bit later. "Seems to be working fine."

"Who — What are you?" Jeremy asked.

"I'm a Fleep," came the answer. "I'm that flickering patch of light you were wondering about a while back."

"You live around here?"

"I have for a long while, Jeremy. It's easy if you're an energy being with a lot of psi powers."

"That's how we're conversing?"

"Yes. I installed a telepathic function in your mind while I had you unconscious."

"Why aren't I being stretched into miles of spaghetti right now?"

"I created an antigravity field between you and the black hole. They cancel."

"Why'd you help me?"

"It's good to have someone new to talk to. Sometimes I get bored with my fellow Fleep."

"Oh, there's a whole colony of you?"

"Sure. This is a great place to study physics, and we're all into such pursuits."

"It doesn't seem an environment where life would develop."

"True. We were once a race of material beings but we were sufficiently evolved that when we saw our sun was going to go supernova we elected to transform ourselves into this state and study it rather than flee. In fact, that black hole used to be our sun. Makes a great lab. Come on, I'll show you. You

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can see more than you used to because I fiddled with your senses, too. I increased their range. For one thing, you should be able to detect a halo of Hawking radiation above the event horizon."

"Yes. Lavender, violet, purple.... It's rather lovely. If I kept going and passed through the event horizon would my image really be captured there forever? Could I come back and see myself frozen at that moment?"

"Yes, and no. Yes, you would clutter up the view with your arrested light. No, you couldn't come back and see yourself doing it. There's no way out once you go in."

"I phrased it poorly. Say, if there are other Fleep, there must be something special to call you to distinguish you."

"Call me Nik," the other said.

"Okay, Nik. What are those pinpoints of fire ahead? And the huge dark masses about them?"

"Those are my people, performing an experiment. I've been moving us at a very high velocity."

"I've noticed that the hole covers a lot more of the sky now. What sort of experiment?"

"Those great dark masses are the remnants of tens of thousands of suns and planets we've transported here. You only see the ones in space proper. We pull them out as we need them. We're shooting them into the hole."

"Why?"

"To increase its rate of rotation."

"Uh — To what end?"

"The creation of closed timelike curves."

"You've got me on that one."

"Time loops. To permit us to run backward through the past."

"Any successes so far?"

"Yes. A few."

"Have you got anything that might permit me to get back to the *Raven* before the explosion?"

"That's pushing it. But it's one of the things I wanted to check."

They matched velocities with the flickering congregation, and Nik took him into the vicinity of the largest of these beings. The conversation that followed resembled heat lightning.

"Vik says there's one that might do it," Nik told him after a time.

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"Let me use it. Please."

"You should also have strength of mind sufficient to alter your velocity by thought alone," Nik said. "Come this way."

Jeremy followed him by willing it until, abruptly, he faced a mass of lines which resembled a computer design suddenly generated in free space.

"I did that just to make you conscious of it," Nik said. "Enter the trapezoid to your left."

"If this works I may not see you again. I'd better say thanks now."

"Noted with pleasure, though I'd like to have kept you longer, for full conversations. I understand your state of mind, however. Go."

Jeremy entered the trapezoid.

In an instant, everything changed. He was back aboard the *Raven*, standing wearing his suit, helmet in hand. Immediately, he rushed toward the control station, donning his helmet as he went. He felt the familiar drop into space proper. The tidal forces took hold of the *Raven*, and it began to groan and creak.

He could see the switches for the Warton-Purg drive and he extended his arm, reaching. Then the ship came apart and he was drawn away from the controls. He glimpsed a jumpsuited human form, turning and turning.

Later, drifting, he met a Nik who did not recall him but who quickly understood his explanation as to what had occurred.

"Am I still in the closed timelike curve?" Jeremy asked.

"Oh, yes. I know of no way of departing a CTC till it's run its course," Nik replied. "In fact, theoretically, if you could do it you'd wind up inside the black hole."

"Guess things get to run their course then. But listen, this time around it was a little different than the first time."

"Yes. Your classical physics is deterministic, but this isn't classical physics."

"I actually got close to the *Raven*'s controls. I wonder...."

"What?"

"You've installed a form of telepathy in my mind. Could you also teach me something — telekinetic, perhaps — that would give me the ability to hold a bubble of air around my head for a minute or two. I'm convinced that slowing to put on the helmet was what kept me from reaching the controls."

"We'll see what we can do. Take a nap."

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When Jeremy awoke he had the ability to move small objects with his mind. He tested this by removing units from his tool kit, having them orbit his arms, his legs, his head, and returning them without touching them physically.

"I think I've got it, Nik. Thanks."

"You're an interesting study, Jeremy."

This time when he entered the trapezoid he had his mind flexed, and he gathered the bubble of air to him as he rushed toward the control station.

He waited, his hand hovering above the appropriate bank of lights, for the Warton-Purg drive to drop the *Raven* into space proper. The lights went out. Immediately, he ran his hand across the row, illuminating them again.

Simultaneous with the clutch of the tidal forces, he felt the explosion from the rear of the vessel. The manual had been right. Reactivating the drive immediately following shutdown was hazardous to the health. He pulled on his helmet as a sheet of flame flashed toward him. The suit's insulation protected him from the heat as the *Raven* came apart. This time he did not see the jumpsuited figure.

Again, he drifted.

When Nik rescued him, he told him the story.

"...So, either way I lose," he concluded.

"So it would seem," Nik said.

When the CTC ran its course and Nik went off to report the results of the latest trip to Vik, Jeremy looked toward the event horizon with his enhanced senses.

He was aware of his antigrav field now, could even manipulate it with his mind. He was certain that he could control it sufficiently to keep himself unstretched or unsquashed at least between here and the layer beneath the violet band.

"What the hell," he said.

He wondered what sort of final image he would leave for eternity.

II.

He descended quickly toward the devouring sphere, and soon it was as if he fled among the curtains of an Aurora Borealis. At one point it seemed that Nik might have called after him, but he could not be certain. Not that it mattered.

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What had he left of life even with the kindly Fleep? His suit's oxygen, water, and nutrients would dwindle toward an unpleasant end and there was no chance of anyone coming to his rescue. Best to pass in this blaze of glory seeing what no man had seen before, leaving his small signature upon the universe.

As the waves rose to embrace him, the colors darkened, darkened, were gone. He was alone in a black place and without sensation. Had he actually penetrated the black hole and survived, or was this but his final, drawn-out thought in a time-distorting field?

"The former," Nik said from a place that seemed nearby.

"Nik! You're here with me!"

"Indeed. I decided to follow you and give what assistance I could.

"As you entered did you see the image I left behind on the event horizon?"

"Sorry, I didn't look."

"Are we into the singularity?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. I've never been this way before. The process may be one of infinite infall."

"But I thought that all information was destroyed once it entered a black hole."

"Well, there is more than one school of thought on that. Information is necessarily bound up with energy, and one notion is that it might remain coherent in here but simply become totally inaccessible to the outside world. The information cannot exist independently from the energy, and this way of considering it has the advantage of preserving energy conservation."

"Then it must be so."

"On the other hand, when your body was destroyed as we entered here I was able to run you quickly through the process by which I became an immortal energy being. Thought you might appreciate it."

"Immortal? You mean I might be an infinitely infalling consciousness here for the effective life of the universe? I don't think I could bear it."

"Oh, you'd go mad before too long and it wouldn't make any difference."

"Shit!" Jeremy said.

There was a long silence, then a chuckle from Nik.

"I remember what that is," he finally said.

"And we're in it without paddles," Jeremy noted.

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III.

"There is another factor in our case," Nik said after an eternity or a few minutes, whichever came first.

"What is that?" Jeremy asked.

"When I talked to Vik he mentioned that we've messed so much with this black hole and its rotation that we might have provoked an unusual situation."

"What's that?"

"It's theoretically possible for a black hole to explode. He thought that this one was about to. Seeing it happen is sort of a once-in-a-lifetime affair."

"What goes on when it blows?"

"I'm not sure and neither was Vik. The cornucopion hypothesis would seem most in keeping with our present situation, though."

"Better tell me about it so it won't come as a complete surprise."

"It holds that when it blows it leaves behind a horn-shaped remnant smaller than an atom, weighing about a hundred-thousandth of a gram. Its volume would be unlimited, though, and it would contain all of the information that ever fell into the black hole. That, of course, would include us."

"Would it be any easier to get out of a cornucopion than out of a black hole?"

"Not here it wouldn't be. Once our information leaves our universe it stays gone."

"What do you mean 'not here'? Is there a loophole if it gets moved someplace else?"

"Well, if it could be bounced past the Big Crunch and the next Big Bang and wind up in our successor universe its contents might be accessible. We only know for sure that they're barred from release in *this* universe."

"Sounds like a long wait."

"You never know what time will be doing in a place like that, though. Or this."

"It's been interesting knowing you, Nik. I'll give you that."

"You, too, Jeremy. Now I don't know whether to tell you to open your sensory channels to the fullest or to shut them down as far as you can."

"Why? Or why not?"

"I can feel the explosion coming on."

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There followed an intense sensation of white light which seemed to go on and on and on until Jeremy felt himself slipping away. He struggled to retain his coherency, hoped he was succeeding.

Slowly, he became aware that he inhabited a vast library, bookshelves sweeping off in either direction, periodically pierced by cross-corridors.

"Where are we?" he finally asked.

"I was able to create a compelling metaphor, allowing you to coordinate your situation," Nik replied. "This is the cornucopion within which all of the information is stored. We inhabit a bookshelf ourselves. I gave you a nice blue leather cover, embossed, hubbed spine."

"Thanks. What do we do now, to pass the time?"

"I think we should be able to establish contact with the others. We can start reading them."

"I'll try. I hope they're interesting. How do we know whether we've made it into the next universe and freedom?"

"Hopefully, somebody will stop by to check us out."

Jeremy extended his consciousness to a smart red volume across the way.

"Hello," he said. "You are ...?"

"History," the other stated. "And yourself?"

"Autobiography," Jeremy replied. "You know, we're going to need a catalogue, so we can leave a Recommended Reading List on top."

"What's that?"

"I'll write it myself," he said. "Let's get acquainted." ☙

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R. Garcia y Robertson's novel, American Woman, *will appear soon from AvoNova. His story "Cast on a Distant Shore" was reprinted in* The Best from the Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, *published by St. Martin's Press last fall.*

His newest story, "Gone to Glory," inspired this month's cover. And instead of a bit about the story, we have a note about the artwork. Artist Barclay Shaw explains that the cover was created on an Apple Macintosh computer. "The airship, flying figure, and landscape were designed and rendered in a 3-D software program called StrataPro. The figure mounted on the rhino-horse was created in a paint program called Painter (oddly enough). All the elements along with the sky background were assembled in Adobe Photoshop, a photo manipulation program."

The result: an illustration of a science fiction story using techniques that didn't exist fifteen years ago. Truly science fiction art — in all senses of the phrase.

Gone to Glory

By R. Garcia y Robertson

The Sad Café

DEFOE SAT at one of the Sad Café's outdoor tables, soaking up gin slings and watching an energetic couple attempting to mate in midair, wearing nothing but gossamer wings and happy smiles. This pair of human mayflies had to be used to the exercise — neither showed a gram of fat or a bit of shame.

The four-hundred-year-old bistro stood in an open air park on the *Rue Sportif* near Spindle's main axis, where g forces were low and the fun never slowed. Holodomes and hanging gardens arched overhead. Beyond the mating couple, halfway up Spindle's curve, nude bathers raised slow motion splashes in a low-g pool. Not a shoddy spot for doing nothing. Defoe ordered his third (or maybe sixth) sloe gin sling from a roving cocktail bar, a barrel-shaped dispenser doing a lazy drunkard's walk between the tables, happily doling out drinks. Never asking for credit or expecting a tip. Human service was rarer than saber-tooth's teeth on Spindle.

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Sipping his sloe gin, Defoe listened with mild disinterest to priority beeps coming over the comlink clipped to his ear. The first calls weren't for him, but they were coming fast and close together. Always a sad sign. Hoping not to be dragged too deeply into other people's troubles, he had his navmatrix decode the binary signals. The pilot's navmatrix grafted into the back of his skull was immune to alcohol. Defoe could down a dozen gin slings and still pilot a tilt-rotor VTOL in a blinding sand storm, or rendezvous with a starship — if the need arose. Only the need never arose. Not here. Not now.

First came a distress bulletin, direct from dirtside.

Then a standby alert.

Followed by a formal AID action request.

The final call was for him. Defoe answered in his off-duty voice.

Salome, his section head, came on line. Her parents had been ultra-orthodox Satanists (who believed John the Baptist had it coming) and her strict religious upbringing made Salome controlled and precise, with barely a wayward impulse. Except for her hair, which tumbled in untamed curls and wild midnight blue ringlets past her hips, almost to the floor. She sounded soft and winsome over the comlink, a sure sign HQ was in second degree alarm — Salome never courted underlings unless she needed something. "There's an AID team down in Tuch-Dah country. They want us to send someone."

Defoe snickered. "Who's the lucky sucker?"

"AID wants an 'experienced surface hand.' Someone who *knows* the Tuch-Dah. You've been fortunate with them."

"Fortunate? Not hardly. Incredibly lucky would be nearer the mark." Not the sort of luck Defoe aimed to lean on.

Salome persisted. "But you have come through intact — always a plus — and saved us a lot of trouble." And saved the Tuch-Dah a lot of trouble, thought Defoe, not that the ungrateful bastards ever seemed to notice. "Besides you're fresh up from the surface; it won't be so much of a shock."

"Right. With four months up-time coming." Up-time as in up here — on Spindle — where it was too perfect a day to contemplate work. Defoe had just done a solid eighteen weeks on Glory. Great-aunt Tillie in Alpha C would do duty dirtside before he went back early. "Last time AID lost a team the problem solved itself — Tuch-Dahs sent their heads back in a leather bag."

"Marvelously considerate. But we can't always count on it. Take a couple of weeks," Salome suggested. "Clear this up, and we'll make it five

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months." That was double time. A rare offer. AID had to be in a fine panic.

"Make it six months," Defoe said. *Every* day in paradise is perfect — so one is as good as another. He was demanding four days of up-time for every day dirtside — a splendid deal if he was so awfully essential.

"Find the team first," Salome told him primly. "Four weeks for going down to Glory. Four more for getting the job done." Defoe would get the extra days only if he delivered.

Bargaining with a Satanist was like dealing with the Devil. Centuries of persecution had turned a diabolically carefree sect into overcompensating overachievers. But it was always a comfort knowing that in the bad old days decent folk would have tied his boss to a stake and had her barbecued.

"I'll need a free hand," Defoe told her. "No interference from AID."

"That's your lookout. AID will be there — it's their team that's down. The way to avoid them is to get going and keep going."

"Sure thing." Defoe was already up and moving. "See you in Hell, Salome."

"Not unless you convert." He could hear her wicked smile. Another sign things were serious. Normally, Salome would never kid about religion.

Sloe gin and low gravity made the slidewalk seem to float in front of him. Rooftops and tree-lined arcades curved upward, vanishing into the light streaming down the length of the rotating habitat, reflected inward from mirrors set in the spinning well of stars. Spindle could amaze even sober senses.

Kids flashed past on the slidewalk, tanned young bodies in overdrive. Defoe passed feelie spas and low-g saunas. Happy holos invited him in. No more. Not now. Sorry guys. Got to sober up and go to work.

Temptation abounded. And it was all free, from gaming orgies to organic feasts. Free as air to anyone who set foot on Spindle. Like an ancient Greek polis, Spindle made its own laws — but without the polis' slavery and infanticide — computers and birth lotteries took their place. No money. No credit. No theft, graft or taxes. And like the ancient polis Spindle had only two punishments that mattered. Death and exile. Now Defoe had to face both of these fates, for nothing except the right to return. Hardly fair, but the system lacked honest work.

At Port Orifice — the cavernous lock that let ships enter and exit — he drew emergency rations, heat caps, a thermal parka, bedroll, camp knife,

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folding mattock, climbing rope, canteen and medikit. Telling the medikit to sober him up, he ticketed himself for the surface.

A call came through with his clearance. Salome's assistant, a pretty little catamite with painted lids and pierced nipples, purred into the comlink. "Hey big boy. Is it true the Tuch-Dahs are cannibals?"

"No such luck." Defoe doubted Salome's kept boy had ever *seen* the surface. "They only eat people." Given conditions on Glory, Defoe thought cannibalism should at least be legal. Maybe even mandatory. If people were like hyenas, compelled to eat everything they killed, dirtside would be a safer place.

Salome's pet laughed wickedly. "Old Battle-ax wants to talk with you."

"Who?" The lock door dilated, cheerily welcoming Defoe aboard.

"Ellenor Battle. Boss dragon lady at AID."

Defoe stepped through the lock into the shuttle. "Tell 'em I've gone to Glory."

The oxy-hydrogen shuttle lacked g-fields and cabin service; inflight entertainment was a pair of tiny portholes. Defoe felt the backward jolt of retros. Spindle seemed to leap ahead; the sole fleck of civilization in this very Outback system dwindled rapidly.

He had his navmatrix tap into the shuttle's moronic guidance system. Nerve endings merged with avionics — sensors, astrogation, and stabilization became extensions of sight, sound, and kinesthetics. A modest thrill. Pretty dry compared to real piloting. Defoe's previous employer had been an over-privileged idiot who wracked up a Fornax Skylark, stranding Defoe insystem. Delta Eridani was a dead end, producing nothing the wider universe needed. Traffic was all incoming. Subsidized AID shipments came in cosmic packing crates — robofreighters cannibalized at their destination.

Only a knack for steering through trouble (and putting up with Thals) earned Defoe part-time privileges on Spindle.

At the top of the stratosphere, the shuttle shifted her angle of attack. Acceleration gave way to the gentle persistent push of gravity. Through the near porthole Defoe saw the green-brown limb of the planet rising to greet him, edged by a thin corona of atmosphere. Cloud puffs hung over blue splotches — large lakes or inland seas. Knocking around the Near Eridani, he had seen worlds aplenty, some good, some bad, some merely uninhabitable.

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When humans first arrived, Glory had been an airless husk, pitted with craters. Relentless terraforming had made her almost liveable. No worse than New Harmony, Elysium, Bliss, or any of a half-dozen made-to-order worlds. Either a shining success story, or a case of hideous ecocide. As a pilot, Defoe had to believe in terraforming — starships needed places to go.

The shuttle came screeching in for a horizontal landing. Millions of kilometers of steppe, savanna, and lava desert allowed landing strips to be as long as you liked. A groundhand undogged the hatch with a gleeful, "Welcome to dirtside, land of enchantment — where falls can kill you, beasts can eat you, and Thals will snap your spine just to hear it pop. Watch your step, you are in two-thirds g."

Defoe nodded. He was used to gaining thirty kilos every time he went down to Glory. The strip was a study in spasmodic activity. Cargo pallets came dropping down from orbit, braked by big silver chutes, raising yellow clouds of dust. Semi-rigids landed and departed. SuperChimps sat like rows of sad monkeys, ready to help with the unloading. It had been cocktail time on Spindle; here it was early morning. Dun-colored hills stretched north and west of the field. Beyond the electrified perimeter a solitary male moropus dug for steppe tubers. Hyenas trotted past, giving the moropus wide leeway — behind them, the Camelback Steppe disappeared into endless distance.

Waiting at the bottom of the landing ladder was a uniformed woman. Tall and athletic, with her steel-gray hair cut down to stubble, Ellenor Battle could easily have looked half her age — but she did not go for biosculpt or hair toner. Taking life as it came, she expected the universe to do the same. Defoe had dealt with Ellenor before, finding her as proud as Lucifer's aunt, a no-nonsense reminder that AID stood for the Agency for *Imperial* Development.

She gave him a liquid hydrogen greeting. "Welcome to Glory. You missed your briefing." Defoe confessed as much. Full-blown AID briefings were full of glaring oversights and ass-backward assumptions — besides, if the problem was solvable from orbit AID would not have asked him down. But he listened dutifully to the facts as Ellenor saw them. "We have a semi-rigid and crew more than forty hours overdue. Orbital recon spotted the crash site in the TransAzur, Tuch-Dah territory..."

"How many in the crew?"

"Three."

"All human?" A normal enough question, but Ellenor Battle took it

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badly, replying with a curt nod. Defoe never knew what was about to bother her. She was very like a Thal in that way — moody and demanding. Salome might worship Satan, but you at least knew where you stood.

A bang and a wail cut off conversation. SuperChimps were refueling the shuttle for her return to Spindle. Boiling LOX filled the collapsed tanks, screaming through the safety valves. With an irritated wave, Ellenor led him away from the ladder. Defoe matched her swift sure strides.

Two huge airship hangars dwarfed the clutter of buildings edging the strip. Outside the electrified perimeter sprawled Shacktown, one of those shameful slums-cum-animal-pens that sprang up around an Outback landing field. Cook smoke climbed lazily over dirty-naked Thal children searching through dung heaps for breakfast. Plastic honeycomb, narrow alleys and open sewers gave Shacktown the look and smell of a slave labor camp — lacking only the camp's energy fences and city services.

The howl of liquid oxygen faded, and Ellenor went on, "A Thal came into Azur station with a ship's recorder — hoping to trade it for booze. When the ship crashed the survivors were attacked by Tuch-Dahs."

It had been a long time coming, Defoe decided, but all hell had finally broken out.

The main hangar was packed with nervous armed humans. Defoe was welcomed aboard by the Port Master, a local worthy who doubled as Mayor of Shacktown, charged with neglecting sanitation and handing out beer and bhang on election day. The hangar canteen had been opened for the duration. Drunk vigilantes brandished riot pistols, pepper grenades, and scoped sporting lasers — as though they could not decide whether they were faced with a prison break or a big game hunt. A Tuch-Dah uprising had the worst elements of both.

The quarter-kilometer hangar housed a giant rigid airship, the *Joie de Vivre*, belonging to a rancher named Helio from the Azur. Ellenor Battle pushed through the jittery throng with Defoe in tow, making for the control-car. The gangway was guarded by a brace of armed Thals, meaner than normal Neanderthals, nearly as tall as Defoe, and twice as broad looking as thick as they were wide. Standard airship harnesses supporting stubby grenade launchers and bandoleers of gas grenades. A pair of dire wolves strained on electronic leashes.

The liquored up posse, loudly aiming to take on the entire Tuch-Dah

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nation, gave the two Thals ample space. It was easier to talk of annihilating ten thousand Neanderthals somewhere out on the steppe than to face down a couple of them sporting grim looks and civilized weapons.

What the Thals thought, Defoe could hardly guess. Heavy brow ridges hid their deepset eyes.

A rigger appeared at the top of the gangway — a *Homo sapiens* with dark skin, and a drooping mustache trained to blend into trim whiskers. Giving a sloppy sarcastic salute, he led them to the control car's lounge. He had a gasman's easy grace, accustomed to balancing on a catwalk in any sort of wind and weather. Crepe overshoes kept him from raising sparks. "Rig'em Right" was scrawled across the back of his bullhide flight jacket, and he had the veteran gasman's grin — the small ironic smile that said he savored the insanity of making his living aboard a flying bomb.

Helio had that smile too. He sat by an open lounge window, eyes hidden by blue wraparound shades. Broad-shouldered as a Thal, the rancher was reckoned to be a dead shot. Surrounded by a breakfast buffet of cold capon and Azur caviar, he still looked deadlier than any dozen men outside.

Defoe pulled up a handwoven wicker seat, admiring the gold pattern in his plate.

Ellenor Battle tried to decline brunch, but Helio insisted. "It's no advantage to be uncomfortable."

No advantage indeed. Defoe let his host pour him some offplanet champagne. Relaxing under six tons of explosive hydrogen did not stop Helio from doing himself up right. Silk panelling framed slender lacquered columns.

"The first thing," Helio told his guests, "is to see this recorder — and the Thal who found it. We have the transmission from Azur Station. But what is that? A bunch of digital blips." He smiled behind his blue shades, kissing off the tips of his fingers. Electronic evidence was notoriously manipulatable — inadmissible in honest courts.

"So long as we get going." Ellenor Battle glared out the open window at the panicky mob scene below.

Defoe agreed. He too wanted to see the recorder — and the Thal who found it. But most immediately he had to get out of this idiotic atmosphere with its infectious panic. Once underway, things were bound to be better. Helio was supposed to *understand* Thals, and conditions in Tuch-Dah

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Country — as well as anyone could pretend to. Besides, if there was any answer to the disappearance of the AID team, it was going to be "out there." Somewhere in the endless unknown that lay beyond the fringes of settlement, even on human-made planets. Defoe was fairly at peace with that. Hell, at the moment he made a dubious living off it.

Helio gave orders from the table, speaking through the open window and into the ship's comlink, letting the Port Master's young assistant come aboard, along with a couple of sober gunmen. The rest of the mob would be more of a threat to themselves than to the Tuch-Dahs. A gang of SuperChimps hauled on the ground lines and the cabin began to move.

As they cleared the hangar, Defoe had his navmatrix lock into the onboard systems. Everything read right. Gas pressure. Wind speed. Elevator alignment. Keel angle. When Helio gave the order to "up ship," the champagne in Defoe's glass did not so much as quiver. The sign of a good crew.

Shacktown and the landing strip fell away to windward. There was a hesitation as the big props started to turn, biting into thin air. Then airspeed picked up and they plowed along, powered by a cold fusion reactor driving four paired propellors. The Camelback Steppe rolled placidly along a few hundred meters below. Springbok bounded off, alarmed by the airship's shadow.

Defoe decided he should see the recorder transmission from Azur Station, subjecting it to his own prejudices before hearing about it from others. Helio gave an airy wave. "Use my cabin. I have flying to do."

Ellenor Battle followed Defoe to the cabin, bent on seeing the recording again. Helio's private quarters were a sumptuous reminder of the good things to be had on Glory — hand-carved ivory and fine embroidery — luxuries that people on Spindle were too busy enjoying themselves to produce. And there was power to be had as well. Snappy service from human and semi-human attendants. Naked authority over Chimps, Thals, and Shacktown whores who would do nearly anything for next to nothing. Exotic animals roamed the endless veldt, ready to be hunted, killed, and butchered — the cabin was carpeted with a giant moropus hide, its head and claws attached. Defoe knew dirtsiders who were not even tempted by the tame pleasures of Spindle, who snickered when he boarded a shuttle to go back.

The 3V imager made use of one whole bulkhead, turning curios and tapestries into a stereo tank.

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Images leaped out. Defoe saw at once that the transmission wasn't a proper flight recording. The transmission had to come from an AID team member's personal recorder. First came establishing scenes — the semi-rigid taking off, steppe wildlife, a couple of male team members. Then came a terrible swift pan of breathtaking intensity. The recorder was sited on a small rise, aiming downslope. A low cairn of charred stones poked out of the steppe grass. Defoe flinched as rocket grenades and recoilless projectiles roared right at the recorder, a barrage so real that he almost dived out of his wicker seat, expecting to be showered with exploding shrapnel and shattered bric-a-brac. A ragged line of Thals came screaming out of the long grass, waving steel hatchets and hideous spiked clubs. They were Tuch-Dahs — no doubt there — Defoe recognized the garish paint and bloodfreezing cries.

Willungha himself led the charge, atop a full-grown moropus — a tremendous horse-headed, long-necked beast with rhino-sized shoulders and tree-trunk limbs. Like Tars Tarkas aboard a wild thoat, the Neanderthal chieftain brayed commands, wielding a long thin lance. A grenade launcher in his rein hand looked like a tiny toy pistol.

Willungha's mount reared, waving clawed forefeet, and the recorder swung crazily, focusing for a second on the scene atop the knoll. Defoe could clearly make out the crash site. Kneeling among blackened girders and burnt grass was a woman, the third member of the AID team. She was small and brown-haired, in a rumpled uniform, taking painstaking aim with a recoilless pistol. Brown eyes stared intently over the sights, seeming to look right at Defoe. She squeezed off shot after shot as death stormed toward her.

The recorder jerked upward. Swaying grass tops framed empty blue sky. A superbly ugly Tuch-Dah appeared, swinging a hideous curved club. The transmission ceased, replaced by braided hangings and a case of bone china.

Defoe turned to lady Ellenor, saying, "That was fairly ghastly." Shutting her eyes, she gripped her wicker seat with white knuckles, letting out a short sharp gasp. He had thought Ellenor Battle would be fairly shockproof, especially on a second viewing — but without any warning, her feelings were showing. The woman was full of surprises.

Helio was in the lounge. Any flying he had done had not taken him away from the table. Breakfast had disappeared, but his glass still held champagne. Broken highlands had replaced the Camelback Steppe. Defoe's navmatrix knew the country; beyond these mesas lay the Sleeping Steppé. Then the Azur.

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"Enjoy the show?" Helio's eyes were still hidden by blue shades, so it was hard to tell how he meant it.

Defoe nodded. A full-blown Tuch-Dah massacre. No wonder everyone from the Port Master on down was potted and praying. There were a thousand or so bona fide *Homo sapiens* on Glory. Plus maybe twice as many on Spindle who weren't much inclined to come down. Willungha could field 20,000 club-wielding Tuch-Dah, if he cared to. There were ten million Thals spread over the planet.

Helio twirled the stem of his champagne glass. "Glory might have been a new Eden for ambitious youngsters from the Home Systems — but the *task* of terraforming was too real for them." Helio did not have to say that *he* had come here, giving up the easy life to raise bison and horses, risking his neck with archaic technology, making the planet not merely habitable but semi-inviting.

He clearly relished the irony of how hard it was to get people just to come down from Spindle. Yet the habitat was built as an interstellar slowboat, launched ages ago to seed the Delta Eridani system. A home for humans while Glory was being terraformed. But by the time Glory had a biosphere and a semi-breathable atmosphere, the insystem humans had become perfectly adapted — to life on Spindle.

So AID had to go for Thals. Retrobred Neanderthals were shipped direct to Glory, to do the drudge work, overseeing SuperChimps, leveling landing strips, digging canals, tending great herds of herbivores. And the brutes had done a sterling job. Hell, they were still doing it. While backward types — like the Tuch-Dahs — bred like lemmings out on the vast steppes.

Defoe glanced over at Ellenor Battle. AID had planned this fiasco, from the first slowboats to the retrobreeding program that produced not just the Neanderthals, but a ready-made Cenozoic ecology as well.

She gave him a defiant glare, daring him to say that AID's multithousand-year program was a disaster. "The first colonists are on their way — 10,000 settlers, headed straight from Epsilon Eridani at near light speed. And a hundred thousand more are set to follow. And a million after that."

Epsilon E was less than twenty light years away.

"Excellent." Helio emptied his champagne glass with an evil chuckle. "Willungha will have them for breakfast."

The rancher was right. Even a Navy cruiser with antimatter warheads

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could hardly cope with ten million Thals spread over an entire planet, (Currently the Navy had not so much as a captain's gig insystem.) The colonists could be armed of course — but the Tuch-Dahs knew all about modern weapons. Dumping an armed mob of city-bred humans on a strange world, outnumbered 10,000 to 1, with no way of telling the "good" Thals from the "bad" ones would be a first-magnitude disaster. They might as well ship the weapons straight to Willungha, compliments of AID.

Ellenor Battle looked angrily out the lounge window, staring stiff-necked and imperious at the endless veldt. "There is room enough for humans and Neanderthals." As she saw it, AID was doing everyone a favor, bringing life to a dead world, making space for settlement, resurrecting a lost race, perhaps partly atoning for some ancient Cro-Magnon genocide.

Helio laughed heartily. "Tell that to Willungha. Maybe there is room. If the wild ones can be tamed, or pushed back. And the colonists kept near the strips. But no one is planning for that, *eh*?" He clearly thought someone should be.

"We have plans," Ellenor retorted.

Defoe thought of the lone AID woman in the recording, backed against the burnt-out wreck, coolly firing at the oncoming Thals. Whatever plans AID was hoarding had to beat that — in fact they had better be damned slick.

The great blue-green ink blot of the Azur hove into sight. Azur Station stood at the near end, a small circle of dugouts and stock pens between the Blue Water Canal and an east-west fence line. All along the canal the Sleeping Steppe had been made to bloom, growing rice, melons, and sugar cane.

Azur's station chief met the airship. She was a big weather-beaten woman named Cleo with flaming red hair, and scoped Centauri Special tucked under her arm — a sign of the times. A caravan was leaving her station, headed west along the fence line. The beasts of burden were low-humped retrobred camels, *Camelops hesternus*, as strong as bactrians but more docile, with finer wool, also better eating.

Cleo had the recorder, and the Thal who had brought it, guarded by armed SuperChimps. The Thal did not understand Universal, or at least pretended not to — staring dumbly at the ring of narrow Cro-Magnon faces.

Helio tried signs. Grudgingly the Thal responded enough to indicate that he was *not* Tuch-Dah. He was Kee-too-Hee, from the marshes. He had found the recorder in a salt pan and trekked down to the station, hoping to get a

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reward. Instead he was being held prisoner and insulted. This did not altogether surprise him, but did not please him either.

Ellenor Battle studied the recorder, then passed it to Defoe with a grim, "What do you think?" The first time she had asked his opinion. Touched, he had his navmatrix go over the recorder. No sign of tampering. But this was an idiot box with sensors, playing back what was put in.

Defoe nodded at the Thal. "He's telling the truth. At least about not being Tuch-Dah. That circle and dot on his cheek is a Kee-too-Hee clan mark. Any right thinking Tuch-Dah would cut his throat with a dull clamshell before claiming to be a Kee-too-Hee."

"But what was the recorder doing sitting on a salt pan?" Ellenor sounded unconvinced. Rightly so as far as Defoe could see. "Give him his reward," she decided. "AID will pay. But don't let him go until we come back from the crash site."

The crash site lay across the Azur. Defoe watched the approach from the control car's foredeck, standing before wide wraparound windows. He felt Helio's firm hand on the elevators, anticipating changes in trim, keeping the keel angle constant. North of Azur Station the shoreline became a maze of salt marsh teaming with spoonbills and wild boar. Then came the Azur itself, bright green in the shallows, deep blue in the center.

Helio pointed out his plantation, a great green delta thrust out into the sea. On the landward side a long straight north-south fence kept his domestic herds from straying into Tuch-Dah country. West of the fenceline was a knoll topped with a black smear left by the burnt semi-rigid. Helio descended, dodging tall columns of vultures. Never a good sign.

Ellenor told Helio to turn out the *Joie's* crew. "Have them go through the long grass around the knoll."

"Looking for what?" The rancher sounded skeptical.

"Whatever they find."

On the ground, Defoe was struck by how peaceful it seemed. This was the Saber-tooth Steppe, a silent mysterious savanna, its mystique as solid and tangible as a patch of unterraformed bedrock. The semi-rigid's small control-car was intact, showing no sign of having come down hard. Blackened girders formed big looping curves. They might have been spares ready to be assembled into another ship.

Dire wolves sniffed out two bodies. "Burnt beyond recognition" hardly

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conveyed the horror of the charred skeletons, jaws agape in final agony, held together by shreds of cooked flesh. Riggers watched Ellenor Battle go over the corpses with cool intensity, calling down DNA signatures and dental data from orbit. "This guy's kinda short," someone suggested. "Maybe he's a Thal."

"I don't know. Might be human."

"Human as you anyway."

"Just bein' hopeful."

Glad not to be needed, Defoe conducted his own search, using his navmatrix to find the low black cairn, and the fold the Tuch-Dah had burst from. A rigger was down in the grass on his knees, a strip of gasbag fabric tied around his head like a bandana holding his hair back. Defoe recognized "Rig'em Right" on the back of the man's jacket.

Seeing Defoe, he got up. His name was Rayson, which everyone shortened to Ray. He held up a small finned and pointed object. "There's a mess of these in the grass." Defoe recognized the spent projectile from a recoilless pistol. The young AID woman had been firing downslope from up by the wreck. Had she hit anything? Defoe looked for bloodstains.

Ray glanced upslope to where Ellenor Battle was working over the bodies, then walked around behind the fire blackened cairn, opening his pants to piss.

Defoe called out softly, "That's a shrine."

Taking a sharp step back, Ray zipped his pants. "Shit, I thought it was a barbecue pit." Just the sort of thing that got people in trouble in Tuch-Dah country — you could get brained by a Thal and never know why.

Finding no blood on the grasstops, Defoe stood up, studying the shoreline. The colder north shore marshes were thin, broken by shimmering white pans. Wind whipped fine, dry grit off the pans, stinging his eyes, settling in skin creases. He licked the corners of his mouth, tasting tiny bits of the Sabertooth Steppe. It was salty.

A dark object lay between the steppe and the sea, as still as the shrine. Defoe walked toward it, brittle shore grass crunching underfoot. The big still object was a bison, down on its knees. Vultures flapped off as Defoe approached. Tail, ears, eyes, and testicles were gone, but the bison was hideously alive, managing to lift its head, turning bloody sightless sockets toward Defoe.

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"Damn." Ray was right behind him, letting out a low whistle. "I'll fix him." He produced a recoilless pistol with a folding stock. Shouldering it like a rifle, he fired.

The bison jerked at the impact, his head dropping, one horn gouging into the sandy pan. Defoe bent down, examining the dead beast; the tongue was torn out, the muzzle white with salt. There was more salt beneath the sand, where the horn had gone in. Looking east and west along the shore, Defoe saw spiraling columns of vultures.

Ellenor Battle pronounced the bodies to be *Homo sapiens sapiens.* Male. Two members of the AID team were accounted for. Cause of death unknown. "We should start a slow search, standard pattern, centered on the crash site."

Helio nodded and they set off again. As Glory's tight ten-hour day ended, Defoe sat in the lounge, trying to fit together everything he had seen — the mob scene in the hangar, the recording, the silent Thal, the crash site and the dying bison. Delta Eridani had sunk down almost to the level of the steppe. The *Joie* was making gentle sweeps at less than 30 kph, twenty meters or so above the grass tops. He doubted they would turn up anything. That would be far too easy.

Gathering his things, Defoe climbed up to the keel. Tall hydrogen-filled gas bags swayed in semi-darkness. A rigger with "Catwalk Charlie" on his jacket bossed a gang of SuperChimps.

Defoe made his way to the empty tail, unsealing an inspection hatch. Grass tops slid by less than twenty meters below. Unreeling a dozen meters of cable from a nearby winch, he swung his legs through the open hatch, letting the cable drop.

"Hope it wasn't something we said." Rigger Ray was standing on the keel catwalk.

Defoe shrugged. "I need room to work."

Ray sat down on a girder, eyeing the open hatch. This close to dusk, shaded by the giant tail, the hatch looked like a black hole whipping along in midair. "There's room aplenty down there. Just don't end up at the bottom of the food chain."

Defoe nodded. "I'll do my damndest."

"Well, good-bye, an' good luck." Ray made it sound like, "Hope to hell you come back."

Defoe dropped through, slid down the cable, and let go. He had ample

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time to position himself. The most charming thing about Glory was the lazy falls at two-thirds g.

Steppe floated up to meet him.

Defoe hit, bounced, and scrambled to his feet. He stood staring up at the big tail of the dwindling airship. The *Joie de Vivre,* kept to her search pattern, straining to complete the last leg before nightfall. When she dipped below a rise, he was alone.

Hip high grass tops ran in every direction, prowled by tawny killers with knife-sized fangs. A cold undertaker's wind sent waves of color sweeping over the twilight steppe — deep blue, rust brown, old gold, and a dozen shades of green. Hyenas chuckled in the deepening gloom.

As Delta Eridani slid beneath the horizon, darkness rose up out of the grass roots, devouring the light. Night birds keened. Whoever said humans were the meanest animals — "the most dangerous game" — undoubtedly said it in daylight. Certainly it was never said at night, alone and unarmed on the Saber-tooth Steppe. Orienting himself by the strange stars of Eridani Sector, Defoe set out walking toward the distant fenceline.

The Saber-tooth Steppe

DEW CLUNG to the grasstops by the time Defoe found the fenceline. He had slept once, to be roused stiff and sore by the cough of a saber-tooth. Throughout the dark morning hours he heard the cat-like predators that gave the steppe its name calling to each other. Dawn wind carried their smell, like the odor of a ship's cat in a confined cabin. At first light the calls ceased; he supposed the pride had made its kill.

The energy fence cut a shimmering line across the steppe, carrying a hefty neural frequency shock. Domestic herds grazed beyond it. Overgrazed in fact. The far side looked like a low-cut lawn.

Defoe walked along the fence until he found a knot of horses, *Equus occidentalis,* tall as Arabians but heavier, with slender feet, reminding Defoe of zebras or unicorns. The lead mare even had zebra stripes across her withers.

The horses lifted their heads as he approached, staring at him and at the hip-high steppe grass. Defoe told his navmatrix to bypass the fence's gullible software. The air between the nearest pylons ceased to shimmer, but still

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carried the signal saying the fence was intact. Ripping up some long grass, Defoe stepped through, offering it to the lead mare. They were immediate friends. She took the grass, letting him mount.

Riding bareback, he guided her through the break in the fence. Her little herd trotted after them. Defoe set a leisurely course deeper into Tuch-Dah country. As his navmatrix moved out of range the fence reestablished itself.

He saw springbok and prong horn, but no bison or Tuch-Dahs. Steppe thinned into shortgrass prairie broken by black knobs of basalt. Curious antelope came right up to him, heads held high, showing off tiny horns and white throats. Brown sombre eyes studied him intently. Defoe doubted they had ever been hunted by humans.

Seeing a spiraling column of vultures, Defoe made for it. It marked a bison kill, a lone bull set upon by hyenas. He got down to study the kill site. Drag marks mapped the struggle. The bison had been hit once, and ripped completely apart, probably in seconds. Nothing remained but rags of hide and white bone-rich dung. Hyenas were more to be feared than overgrown cats; their bite was better than a panther's, and they weren't as picky as a saber-tooth pride.

A shadow swept over him, a gigantic condor-sized shape among the vultures, circling downward, parting the smaller birds, boring toward Defoe in a tight spiraling dive, hiding in the orange glare of Delta Eridani. Almost on top of him, the big shape side-slipped, spilling air. He recognized Ellenor Battle, wearing an ornithopter harness — a powered version of the wings people flew with (and sometimes fucked in) on Spindle. She flew like she had been born with them, doing a low-level stall and landing feet first.

Never let down your guard on Saber-tooth Steppe. Defoe had been blissfully alone, sharing the day with vultures and a dead bison. Now without warning Ellenor Battle was standing over him, demanding an explanation. What excuse could he have for jumping ship, cutting fences, and stealing horses?

Defoe shrugged. "No one *needed* me just to fly around in circles aboard the *Joie de Vivre.*"

What fascinated him was her wings. A really fine pair. Falcoform Condors, solar assisted, seven-plus meters of extendible wingspan, with autoflaps and fingertip trim tabs. An energy pack in the small of her back powered the harness.

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He nodded at the horses. "These are my tickets into Tuch-Dah country. What's your excuse for being here?" When it came to unwanted company, Glory could be more crowded than Spindle.

Ellenor slowly reached behind her back, taking the AID recorder from between her wings — it must have been strapped alongside the power pack. "I'm here because of this." She weighed it in her hands, then held it out. "It's my daughter's."

Defoe shooed aside some vultures and sat down. So, the woman on the AID team was another Battle. They did not look much alike, except perhaps in the shape of the face. But maybe Ellenor's hair used to be brown. More important, this explained her readiness to listen to reason.

"What *is* her name?" — Defoe bore down lightly on the verb, no reason to *assume* she was dead.

"Lila. It's Hindu, and means the playful will of Heaven."

He took the recorder, turning it over in his hands. "So, why didn't your daughter have this with her during the attack?"

"I've been wondering. There might be some simple explanation."

"Might be." But Defoe doubted it. "That makes another strange circumstance about the crash and recording."

"What are the others?" Ellenor folded her wings, settling down across from him.

"First — no crash. That semi-rigid landed intact, then burned on the ground. Second, what sort of shot is Lila?"

"I taught her myself." There was pride in her voice and a recoilless pistol on her hip.

"So I supposed." He remembered how cool and unflinching Lila had looked — a lot like her mother. "But there was no blood on the grass. It is hard to believe every shot was a miss."

Ellenor nodded grimly.

Defoe got up, handed back the recorder, and dusted fine grains off his lap. The soil felt thin and silty. "Can you ride bareback?" Ellenor was not his first choice as a traveling companion, or even his fiftieth, but that was Glory for you.

"I was doing it before you were born." She fixed up a loop bridle, selected a mount, and they set off.

The prairie thinned further. Sandy patches showed between tufts of

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shriveled grass. More buzzards appeared, over more dead bison. More than even hyenas could eat. Defoe reined in, asking, "What do you make of this?"

Ellenor dismissed the apocalyptic scene. "A local die-off. We saw it from orbit. Lila's team was investigating."

Defoe shook his head. "I've been seeing signs of major drought ever since crossing the Azur. And real overgrazing as well. Helio's horses were frantic to cross the fenceline."

Ellenor sniffed. "Is that a pilot's opinion, or are you a xenoecologist as well?"

"You don't have to be a xenoecologist to know a dead buffalo. The water table is falling. You can *see* the steppe salting up. Springbok and pronghorns are filtering in from out of the wild, replacing the bison."

Ellenor denied the Azur was in any trouble. "The sea is stabilized."

"Stabilized?" He reminded her the planet was still terraforming. "Shouldn't the Azur be growing?"

"A local shortfall," she insisted, shrugging off the buzzards and dead bison. "Another wet season and this will all be forgotten."

It did not seem that local to Defoe. Kilometers north of the Azur he could still smell salt on the breeze. Nor would the Tuch-Dah take a "local condition" so calmly — they had to live *here*. And they were not the types to forget and forgive. Anyone who endured a two-day Naming Fast knew Thals had godawful long memories.

From time to time Ellenor took off, soaring aloft to do a turn around the landscape, looking for water. Near to dusk she found a dry bed winding through a sandy bottom. Dismounting, Defoe attacked the damp sand with his mattock. An hour of digging produced a small hole full of brackish liquid. He refilled his canteen, then let the horses drink.

Ellenor alighted on a cutbank, saying a rider was coming.

Defoe nodded. Dusk was when they could expect company. Gathering dry grass and brushwood, he made a bed for a fire. Then he took out a heat cap, a capsule the size of an oral antibiotic, breaking it and tossing it on the wood. It burned with an intense flame and acid odor.

He watched the rider trot warily into camp, separating from the red-orange disk of Delta Eridani. It was Willungha, atop a giant male moropus. Thals did not have aerial recon and orbital scans, but not much that went on in Tuch-Dah country escaped Willungha's attention.

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Despite rumors about him being a half-breed, or even *Homo sapiens*, the Tuch-Dah chieftain was pure Neanderthal, with bulging brow ridges, buck teeth, and a receding chin. That chin was the only weak thing about him. Willungha's huge head and shoulders topped a meter-wide chest; arms the size of Defoe's calves ended in hands strong enough to strangle a hungry saber-tooth (a perennial party pleaser at Tuch-Dah fêtes). An old scar ran along one gigantic thigh. In his youth, Willungha had been gored by a wounded bison, the horn going through his thigh. Hanging head down, with the horn tearing at his leg, Willungha had clamped his good leg and left arm around the beast's neck. Calmly drawing a sheath knife, he cut the bison's throat. Willungha's mount was an ancient cousin of the horse and rhino, intended to be a browser and pruner — recycling plant material into the soil. AID had never thought a moropus could be ridden.

He grunted a greeting.

Defoe did not attempt to answer. Instead he unhobbled the horses, laying the lead mare's halter rope ceremoniously before the Tuch-Dah. He kept back only a pair of mounts and a lead horse for himself and Ellenor.

Willungha responded with a series of snorts. Wild Thals spoke a hideous concoction of clicks, hoots, and grunts, which some *Homo sapiens* claimed to understand, but none could imitate. To the Tuch-Dah, *Homo sapiens* were overwhelmingly deaf and totally dumb, hardly even a thinking species. Powerful and unpredictable maybe, able to tear up the landscape like a mad moropus. But reasoning? Even Willungha reserved judgment. He was tolerably familiar with "man the wise" — which explained his mixed opinion.

Having given gifts, Defoe moved to the next stop in the evening's entertainment, setting up the recorder by the fire, so it would play on the cutbank. Using the eroded rock as a 3V screen, he had his navmatrix sort through the recorder's memory for the final images, including the Tuch-Dah attack. When Willungha himself materialized atop his charging moropus, the chieftain gave a hoot and whistle. For all Defoe knew, it merely meant, "Hello." Or, "Handsome fellow, what?"

Lila appeared next, pistol in hand. Defoe froze the image. Walking up to the scene, he stabbed a finger at her, then made as if to look about — hopefully telling Willungha that he was looking for her.

The Tuch-Dah's eyes fixed him from within their deep sockets. Defoe repeated the signs. Wild Thals were not much impressed with offplanet

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marvels, unless they could put them to use. Without as much as a grunt, Willungha headed off into the dark with his gift horses in tow.

Defoe leaped up, telling Ellenor, "We've got to follow." Willungha was the best lead they were likely to get.

They trekked through most of the short night. Badlands gave way to savanna. Tangerine dawn outlined the tops of black acacias.

Twenty-odd hours without sleep had Defoe dizzy with fatigue — wishing to God he could glaze over for a while. From upwind came the smell of burning dung, denoting a nomad camp.

Beneath the acacias stood a dark circle of yurts, surrounded by lowing herds. A crowd of Thals emerged to click and whistle their leader into camp. Defoe and Ellenor got no such cheery greetings, facing stony indifference leavened by the occasional dirty look.

While Ellenor sat with folded wings, Defoe listened to a lively exchange among the Thals, seeing fists waved in their direction. The discussion narrowed to a debate between Willungha and a tall brute with a broken nose and bold red-ocher tattoos. He must have outweighed Willungha by a couple of stone, but lacked the chieftain's sangfroid. Pug-ugly's part in the conversation consisted of low growls and grim looks.

Willungha ended the exchange, turning abruptly and striding over to where Defoe and Ellenor sat waiting. Squatting on his haunches, he made his position plain with signs and finger jabbing. They were free to search for their stray female, with a single exception. Defoe explained to Ellenor, "The only yurt we cannot enter belongs to mean and ugly over there." He nodded toward the tall Thal with the broken nose and archer tattoos.

Ellenor frowned. "Logically that is the yurt we most want to examine."

Defoe nodded. Thals could be amazingly unsubtle. He fished out his medikit, knowing he would need a boost. Strapping the kit to his calf, he told it to give him the chemical equivalent of a week's rest. "I'll see what I can do about getting Pug-ugly's permission."

Stimulants hummed through his blood. The morning got brighter. A two-thirds g bounce came back to his step. But Defoe hated relying on chemical imbalance — you could fool your body only so long. The Thal stood planted in front of his yurt, a skin hovel on wheels trimmed with camel tails. A bison hide hung over the doorway. Defoe strolled up with a hearty "How ya doin'?"

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The Tuch-Dah merely spat. Since neither could speak the other's language there was no need for formal insults. Defoe slid silently into *migi gamae*, arms hanging loose, spine aligned, right foot leading. Out the corner of his eye, he could see Willungha and the boys settling down to watch the fun.

Giving a roar, the Thal rushed at him, arms raised, bent on snapping the spindly Cro-Magnon in half. Defoe was well outweighed, and his sparring partner would be immune to any sort of body blow. He seized the big right wrist with his left hand. Pivoting sideways, he used the Neanderthal's momentum to sling the ogre over his hip, hacking as hard as he could at the immobilized right wrist. Mean and Ugly went butt-over-brow-ridge into a heap against one wheel of his yurt.

Willungha's boys applauded with pant hoots.

The Thal bounded right back up, snarling like a wounded lion. Favoring his right hand, he lashed at Defoe with his left. Defoe parried with his forearm. A bad mistake — the glancing blow staggered him.

Grinning with feral glee, the Thal circled leftward, not even winded. The bastard had probably gotten his beauty sleep. Defoe's right forearm felt numb, and his lungs rasped — a sign the medikit had reached its limits. Much more of this, and the Thal would wear him down. Then stomp him into oblivion.

The Tuch-Dah lunged at Defoe with his left. This time Defoe ducked under the blow, grabbing the Thal's left hand with both of his, ignoring the injured right. Lacking the strength to go the distance, Defoe held grimly to the Tuch-Dah's good hand. He sent the bellowing ogre cartwheeling over his shoulder, letting the Thal's own weight and momentum bend the left wrist until it snapped.

The Neanderthal lay dazed, one wrist badly sprained, the other broken. A firm believer in kicking a fellow when he was down, Defoe brought his boot heel sharply down on the Thal's tattooed instep, to discourage the brute from getting up. Mean and Ugly moaned.

Dusting himself off, Defoe glanced over at Willungha. The Tuch-Dah chieftain gave a congratulatory grunt. Defoe was free to search the yurt. He hoped to hell he'd find something.

As soon as he lifted the bison hide, Defoe knew that whatever was in the yurt stank all the way to Spindle. Urine, sweat, and burning shit mixed with moldy leather. Worming his way in, he startled a gaggle of Thal children

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playing beside the central fire. They piled out past him, terrified by a *Homo sapiens* bogeyman turned real.

The yurt was dank and smoky, walled with soot and skins — aside from body paint and tattoos, Thals did not bother with decoration. What he was looking for sat in the back, amazingly alive. Alert brown eyes ringed with fatigue stared back at him, hardly believing what they were seeing. "Lila Battle, I presume?"

She managed a nod. Tuch-Dah methods were crude and pitiless. To keep Lila in place a long yoke was fitted around her neck, made from two heavy lengths of wood lashed together with leather. Her hands were free, but the ends of the yoke were out of reach, anchored to the bed of the yurt. She could move enough to feed herself and attend to body functions, but could not reach the knots holding the yoke in place.

As he cut Lila loose, Ellenor Battle came crawling in, dragging her wings. She hurriedly strapped her medikit around Lila's forearm. Mother and daughter were reunited in the fetid interior of a Tuch-Dah yurt, a touching moment lasting about a nanosecond. Lila was clearly Ellenor's daughter, and neither was given to excess sentiment. Before they had finished hugging, Ellenor wanted to know what had happened, and Lila was telling them.

"Helio did it. The bastard flagged us down for a face-to-face. The next thing I knew, I was being bundled up and given to the Tuch-Dahs."

Defoe had suspected something of the sort — it wasn't in Willungha's nature to mix with *Homo sapiens*, either as friends or enemies. Full-fledged humans had to be behind this. But he was sorry to find out it was Helio. He had liked the arrogant asshole.

Hauling out the recorder, he gave Lila a look at her "last stand." She shook her head. "I wish I had put up that fight, but I never saw it coming." She knew nothing about the fate of her ship and team.

"Dead and burned," Ellenor told her daughter bluntly. Everything else had been digitally programmed straight into the dimwitted recorder's memory. A decent scheme, but not foolproof. The chance selection of Lila's recorder had made her mother suspicious. While Defoe was always willing to believe the worst.

"Why didn't he just kill me?" Lila wondered. Having spent the last few days bound in the back of a Tuch-Dah yurt, she was in many ways the most amazed.

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"You are his insurance shot." Defoe set the recorder next to his knee. "A good hunter always has an extra charge handy, to insure his prey is nailed. The crash and fake recording were not enough to thoroughly implicate the Tuch-Dahs. But by the time your body turned up, it would be obvious who had you." Willungha's people probably had no idea *why* Helio wanted one of his females carted about against her will. But the Thal he had made the deal with fought to keep up his end. Touching in a terrible way.

"But why do this at all?" For once Ellenor looked at a loss. "Why wipe out our team? Why blame it on the Tuch-Dahs?"

"Because Azur is dying." Lila spoke softly. "The sea is overloaded. The steppe is salting up." From the way Ellenor scowled Defoe guessed this was an old argument.

Lila matched her mother's stubbornness, insisting that "Sea and grass aren't returning water to the air as fast as the canals are draining it away. The thin layer of soil atop this cinder and bedrock cannot absorb new arrivals. We saw it. Helio sees it. Willungha must know as well. Helio wants the Azur closed off to settlement. So do I. But he apparently thinks it will take a war to do it."

Ellenor gave Lila a sour to-think-I-suckled-you look. But as far as Defoe could see, Helio might be right, even AID wouldn't dump settlers into a war zone. With the colonists diverted and the Tuch-Dah pushed back, Helio would have the Azur to himself.

Hearing hoots outside, Defoe lifted the bison hide for a peek. Thals were looking up. From over the steppe came the beat of paired propellors, announcing more unwanted company. The *Joie de Vivre* was approaching.

Ellenor swore. Her daughter began to gather her strength for a getaway. No one was burning to confront the guilty culprit. Defoe had pictured them sending a signal to Spindle, then lying low until AID organized a rescue operation. Armed and reckless felons should be cared for by the pros.

While Ellenor hustled her daughter out, Defoe scooped up the recorder. Telling his navmatrix to turn the recorder on, he pointed the business end at the yurt fire, getting a long shot of the flames.

By the time Defoe tumbled out, the *Joie de Vivre* was poking her nose over the nearest rise, looming larger as she descended. Mother and daughter were disappearing into the long grass beyond the yurt circle. When he caught up with them, Ellenor had her wings on and communicator out, preparing to

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punch through a call to Spindle. He grabbed her hand, stopping her from opening the channel. "Wait."

"Why?" Ellenor looked angry, annoyed, and scared. Her recoilless pistol was out and armed.

"Helio will be listening," he reminded her. Ellenor might be absolutely ready to sacrifice everything just to see justice done, but Defoe was not near as determined to die for the law. "Give us a chance to get away first."

"How?" she demanded. Running was ridiculous. Helio would swiftly spot them. Nor was there any reason for Willungha to take their side.

"Start by lying down," Defoe insisted, "so we don't disturb the grasstops. Right now we can see him, but Helio can't see us." He had to make the most of that.

The *Joie* settled down on a hillock near camp, close enough to cover the exits, but not so close as to disturb the Tuch-Dahs. SuperChimps swarmed down the ground lines and anchored the airship to the hilltop. Helio and his gunmen trooped down the control-car gangway, sporting rifles tucked under their arms, fanning out as they approached the yurts.

"Get ready to run." Defoe aimed the recorder at the airship. "I'm going to create a diversion."

Lila nodded gamely. Ellenor remained unconvinced. "What sort of a diversion?"

"Fire and panic." Defoe told his navmatrix to set the recorder on playback, projecting a continuously expanding loop using the most recent image in memory. "No matter what you see, run straight for the *Joie de Vivre,* and up that gangway. Got it?" Both women nodded. "Then go," he hissed, triggering the recorder.

They broke cover as a red glow appeared on the hull of the airship — the image of the yurt fire magnified by the recorder — growing into a terrible circle of fire. SuperChimps hooted in terror, scattering away from the ship. In seconds the image covered half the hull, looking for all the world like a trillion cubic centimeters of hydrogen bursting into flame. The control-car crew dived out the gondola windows.

Defoe topped the hill. Shoving Ellenor and Lila toward the gangway, he began releasing ground lines. Lightened by the loss of men and chimps, the airship strained at her anchors, heaving about above him like a whale in labor.

Someone yelled stop. Without bothering to answer, Defoe leaped on the

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last line, pulling the anchor pin, letting the line hoist him up and away. The airship tore off downwind, wallowing drunkenly, her control gondola empty. Dangling cables rattled through the stand of acacias.

Seeing he could not clear the trees, Defoe had his navmatrix send a frantic call to the *Joie's* emergency system, releasing the landing ballast. Tons of water cascaded past. The ship shot upward, out of Helio's range and reach.

His navmatrix ticked off altitude increases. 1000, 2000, 3000 meters. Savanna spun below him. Time he hauled himself aboard. Holding on with his left hand, Defoe reached up with his right, grasping the taut line. Getting a good grip, he let go with his left.

He fell, steel line sliding through his fingers. His right hand would not hold. Making a frantic grab with his left, he managed to catch the line.

Dangling left-handed, Defoe realized his right arm was useless. It would no longer support him. The medikit strapped to his leg had masked his pain, and the damage done by the Thal. Betraying him into trying too much.

Swinging silently, several kilometers in the air, beneath a bucking airship, he pondered his next move. Unable to climb one-handed, Defoe kicked at the end of the line with his boot. If he could snag the anchor loop, he could hang safely until someone hauled him up.

Too far. His foot would not reach. Grasstops whirled dizzily below him. The *Joie de Vivre* topped four kilometers, still rising.

Loosening his left hand, he slid down the line, feeling with his boot for the loop. His toe went in. He gave a silent cheer. He had made it.

Just as his boot settled in, the line jerked — the *Joie* had reached her pressure height, automatically venting hydrogen. Nosing down, she took a drunken dip, porpoising out of control.

Defoe fought to regain his grip. Fatigued fingers weren't quick enough. The line snapped away. Two sleepless nights, the fight with the Thal, the struggle on the line, had all taken too much out of him.

Arms flailing, he fell slowly backward, his booted foot twisting in the loop. Two-thirds g gave him enough time to make a last lunge at the line. And miss.

Dangling upside down, holding on by his boot, he could feel his foot slipping. Doubling up, Defoe made a grab at the boot with his good hand. He got it. Fingers gripped the boot as his foot slipped free and the line bounded away.

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He was falling. Holding tight to the useless boot. Defoe shrieked in fright and exasperation. He could see the snaking line above him, and the shadowy form of the airship starting to dwindle. Five kilometers away, ground rushed silently up to greet him.

Defoe felt none of the dreamy complacency the dying were supposed to enjoy. Even in two-thirds g, onto soft grass, he knew he would hit hard, bounce badly, and not get up. Ever. His navmatrix ticked off the fall. Slow at first. A few meters per second — but ever faster. Numbers began to blur.

The horrible silence was broken by the rush of wings. Hands seized him. Primaries beat frantically. He could feel flaps straining against the sky.

Ellenor Battle had him. Pulling out of her stoop, she was trying to brake, wings beating against better than twice her weight. Good shot, thought Defoe. But the wing loading was way too high. He could feel her stalling, about to tumble into a spin — unless she let go.

But she dug in instead, spreading her wings, defiant to the end. Her contorted face centimeters from his.

Then came a miraculous jerk, and the impossible happened. Defoe bounded to a dead stop in midair.

A line stood taut between Ellenor's shoulders. She had clipped a cable to her harness before diving after him. Staring up at the sky line, Defoe tried to cheer, getting out a grateful croak. The woman was a pigheaded genius, and he wanted to kiss her. But then Ellenor might really drop him.

Meter by meter he felt himself being hauled to safety. The cold-eyed bitch was grinning.

As they were drawn aboard the galloping airship, Defoe saw Rigger Ray working the winch. Lila lay full out on the deck, reaching down to help her mother. Catwalk Charlie was holding tight to a girder, eyes shut, still waiting for the flaming crash. Defoe could hear him mumbling:

Our Satan that art in Hell,
Damned be thy name.
Lead us into temptation,
And encourage our trespasses...

Defoe was shocked. Charlie had never *looked* religious. But a brush with death will bring out the Devil in anyone.

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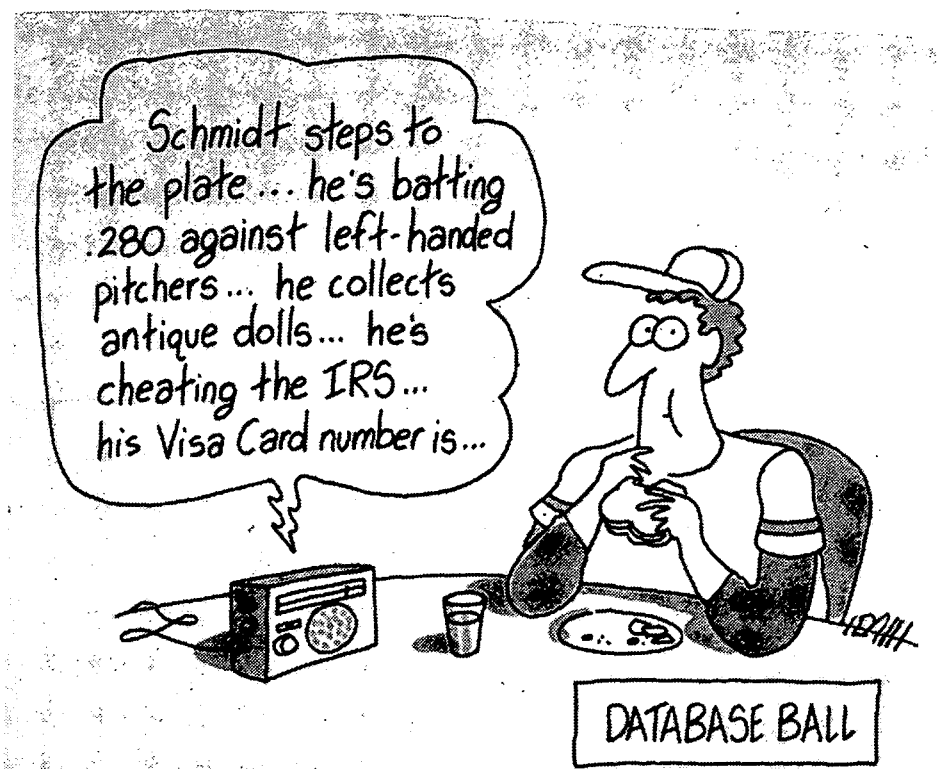
Gingerly sliding his boot on, Defoe told his navmatrix to take control of the airship. The *Joie* righted herself, turning back toward Shacktown.

Hearing Ellenor put in her call to Spindle, Defoe wondered how Helio was doing with Willungha. After murdering two AID workers, trying to frame the Tuch-Dahs, then bungling the cover-up, Helio had serious problems ahead. But so did everyone on Glory. And the first 10,000 colonists were already on their way, leaving Epsilon Eridani at near light speed.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COMING ATTRACTIONS

JULY'S ISSUE had a bonus sports section. August's will have a bonus weather feature in honor of El Nino and other strange weather patterns that have hit North America in the last twelve months.

Robert Reed (who lives in Nebraska) wrote "Our Prayers Are With You" in response to the Midwestern flooding in the summer of 1993. It could as easily have been inspired by the West Coast floods in the early part of 1995. "Our Prayers Are With You" focuses on a town ravaged by flood and by the eyes of the world who watch this tragedy with voracious interest. Sounds like 1995 — but we'd best hope not, since in this story, floods are only the beginning.

We'll have other weather stories as well, and maybe throw in a bit of drought, famine and pestilence to keep the issue moving.

Of course, we will have other types of stories. **Ian Watson**'s imagery sparks **Stephen Gervais**'s imagination, producing a stunning cover for "The Amber Room." The story is about the amber room of legend, a room made up completely of amber and hidden in the mountains of Eastern Europe. But the story is all amber, from amber beads to the woman named Amber at the center of it all.

Finally, **Esther Friesner** returns with one of the most disturbing science fiction stories we have ever read. We can't say more about it than that except to give you the title: "A Birthday." And such a birthday it is.

Future issues hold more surprises. **Ray Bradbury** will return as will Nebula winner **Alan Brennert**. We'll have stories from mystery writer **Ed Gorman**, fantasist **Nancy Springer**, and the ever-popular **Nina Kiriki Hoffman.** And save your pennies for our big Anniversary issue. Hugo-winner **Bob Eggleton** illustrated the first in a new series of stories by **Marc Laidlaw**. You won't want to miss that or any other issue of *F&SF*.

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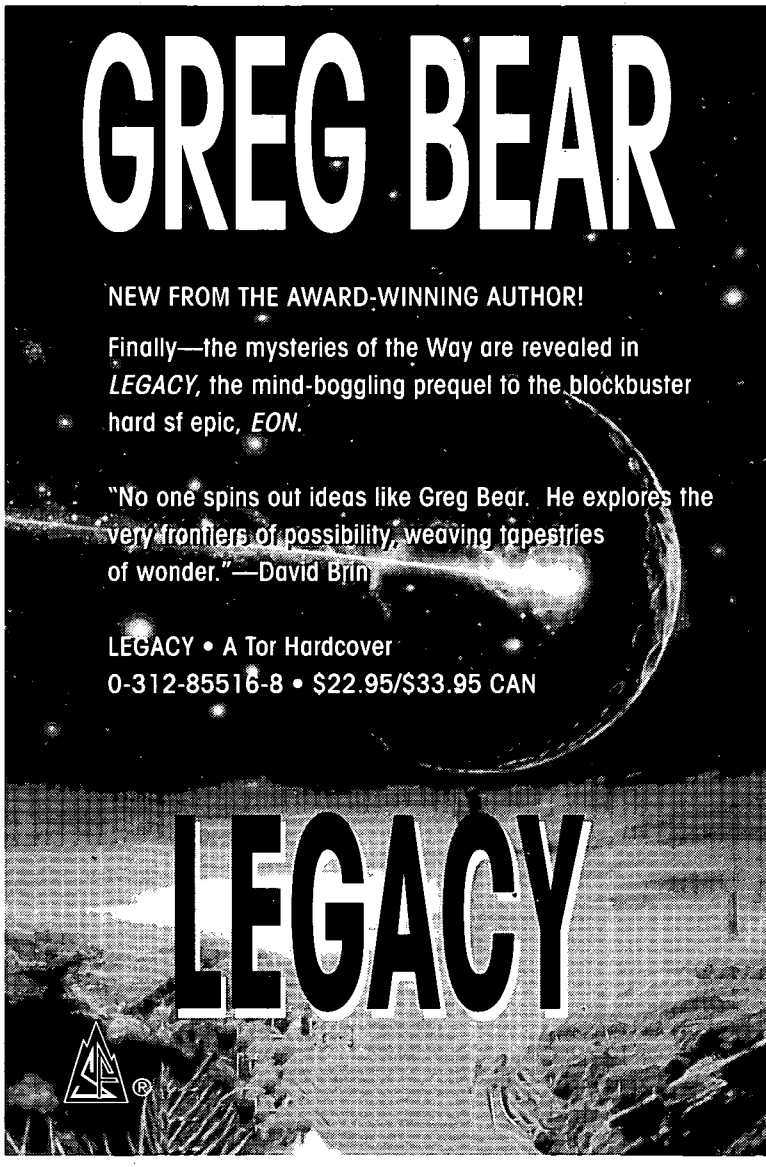
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